

ARMY WITH BANNERS

RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL

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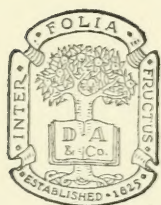
*Army
With
Banners*

By RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL

ARMY WITH BANNERS
CALL OF THE HOUSE
THE WISHING CARPET
PLAY THE GAME
JANE JOURNEYS ON
NARRATIVES IN VERSE
CORDUROY
A WHITE STONE

Army with Banners

BY
RUTH COMFORT MITCHELL



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ALL CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY
ARE IMAGINARY AND ARE NOT POR-
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To

LILLIAN BURKHART GOLDSMITH



Book One

Chapter I

The Lord would provide.

Our Father which art in Heaven. . . .

My father who is in Heaven. . . .

THESE were her first memories: more than memories—feelings, convictions, consciousness of unalterable facts.

Beside the tangible realities of her pale, vague mother and her red, definite grandmother, of many a shallow establishment and hasty exodus, of continued and endless conversations, fretful and fearful and filled with recriminations in a diction beyond her grasp, of scanty food and shabby raiment and wretched housing, these three intangibles forever held their place—

The Lord would provide.

Our Father which art in Heaven. . . .

My father who is in Heaven. . . .

In the beginning, among the more nebulous memories, there were some grotesque misconceptions. One of these came after a hungry day and a tossing, whimpering night, and a faint, dizzy morning.

They had been quartered for a week in a small, drafty shell of a house in a bleak street. A lean, sagging bed for the adults, a pile of clothing and an old comforter on the floor for the child; an unsteady table

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and two infirm chairs; an inverted cracker box for herself to sit on.

The day outside was hard and bright and the room was filled with glare. The unshaded windows had the effect of staring, lidless eyes.

There was a ceaseless murmur of talk, petulant, whining, eager, acrimonious. Her young girl mother, whiter than ever, and she was always pale, sprawling limply over the table; her grandmother, florid, flushed, drawing wheezing breaths as she moved to and fro, from wall to wall, at her short-gearred trot; herself, the tears dried stiffly on her unwashed face, keeping cannily out of the line of march.

A bitter debate was going forward. They were, as ever, at outs: the girl wanted to go back, the woman wanted to go forward.

"I don't care! I can't stand it!" It was a wail, childish and forlorn. "I'm *hungry!*"

"But it's the best chance we've ever had, Angie!" the older woman insisted. "I'm hungry, too,—my land! But they'll be along now, some of 'em, any minute! You'll see!"

The child had fastened upon one very well known word. "Hungry!" she whimpered. "Babe's hungry, Grammer!"

"You hush up!" She turned on her sharply, and then, with a swift change of manner, leaning down, slipping a finger under her chin and tilting her head back—"Listen, Edwina! Listen, Babe! The Lord will provide! Just you remember that, little lamb of God. The Lord—*will*—provide!"

The girl twisted about to scowl at her. "Oh, you make me sick! What's the good of that?"

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"Learnin' her," said the other, doggedly, adding with a suave accession of dignity,—*"I am training her in the way she should go. As the twig is bent—"*

The child's mother made an inarticulate, sneering sound, and Edwina slipped away and went into the kitchen, swaying against the wall in her dizzy weakness. The last food she had seen was in that room, and she cherished a hope which did not wither entirely until she had retrieved a broken paper carton from a pile of trash and shaken it again and again for cracker crumbs.

The kitchen contained nothing in the way of furnishing but a warped and rusted stove with a heap of newspapers and broken boxes beside it, but on the wall, fly-specked and spattered with grease spots, hung a poster with the name of a railroad on it, an exuberant landscape of orange groves in vivid bearing in juxtaposition with snow capped mountains, and a turquoise sky above them, and beneath was printed in scarlet letters the heartening query—*"WHY NOT WINTER WHERE WINTER IS NOT?"*

The child sat down on the floor and fished absorbedly in the litter until she found a paper box which had contained gingersnaps. It was empty, but between the folded oiled paper and the cardboard she found some crumbs which she shook carefully into the palm of one hand and lapped up with her tongue. They were dry and sweet and she finished them with frantic eagerness, but they had the unhappy effect of making her even more ravenous, and added nausea to her miseries.

Presently she went unsteadily to the window and stood on tiptoe to look out, but she swayed again with

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dizziness and could not take hold of the sill for support because it was thickly overlaid with the dusty bodies of dead flies. She sat down on the floor and began to cry dismally.

"Edwina!" called her grandmother from the other room. "You hush! You hush up, now! What did I tell you? The Lord—" the admonition broke off sharply, and she said "Sh . . . ! Sh . . . !" so excitedly that the child went in to see what she meant, and found her with her finger upon her lips, listening intently, and the young girl mother was sitting stiffly upright in rigid attention.

There were heavy steps on the small front porch and a firm knock at the door.

The older woman, with a triumphant whisper—"What'd I tell you?" went down on her knee and her daughter knelt beside her, and an arm shot out to jerk the little girl down into a kneeling posture. Then the grandmother, breathing hard, began in her hoarse voice to pray—

"Oh, dear Lord, we have faith to know that Thou hasn't forsook us just because Thou hasn't got around to sending us earthly food to feed these poor, weak bodies! *We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken, cast down, but not destroyed—*"

There was another rap at the door, and the girl and the child looked, imploring, at the woman, but she merely pitched her voice in a more strident key.

"*For our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory!*"

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The knock was repeated, this time with less confidence. A loose board in the porch creaked; the three steps creaked in sequence.

The girl, still kneeling, but straining backward and upward until she could look out of the window, said in a panic-stricken whisper—"She's going away!"

"Sh . . ." warned her mother, continuing—

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time—"

"I tell you she's going away!" Angie wailed. "Oh, my God! She's gone! *Now*, look,—just because you're so smart! *Now*, look what you've done, just because you always know it all and have to run everything your own way!" She was weeping with temper and terror. "Well, I'm going after her! I'm going to run after her and—"

The older woman got stiffly but quickly to her feet and took command. "No, you won't! You won't stir a step! You set still! You mind me, now, Angie Meeker! Here, Babe!" She caught hold of the child by her sharp little shoulder and propelled her toward the door. "*You* go, Babe! You run after that lady, and you say—'Good morning, lady! Did you want to see my mummer and my grammer?' " She gave her a sudden shake. "D'hear me? Don't stand there so dumb, gawpin' at me! You run after that lady, quick's your legs'll carry you!" She opened the door, standing well to one side of it and pushed the child through with such force that she stumbled and fell upon all fours.

At the sound of her fall the woman in the path halted and looked back over her plump shoulder. She was a mountainous person in a stiffly starched dress which

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made her look larger still, and her round face was rosily pink.

Edwina, picking herself up, made what clumsy speed she could manage, with her weakness and the bewildered excitement, down the steps and down the dusty and weed-grown path.

"Oh," said the caller, uncertainly, "you're the little girl, aren't you?"—and, after a nod of admission—"What's your name, little girl?"

"Edwina."

"Ed-winna! Well, now, isn't that a pretty name for a little girl? And I know you're a nice little girl, too, aren't you? How old are you?—What? You don't know how old you are!" She appeared to be softly shocked. "Well, I am surprised! A smart, pretty little girl with a nice name like Ed-winna, doesn't know how old she is!" She stood still in the path and looked doubtfully back at the house. "I was just passing, and I thought I'd just stop by, but I don't know—I heard them— Are they holding a meeting?"

The child, not very clear as to her meaning, shook her head.

"Oh, I see! Just—just your own services, but I guess maybe they wouldn't want to be disturbed. I could call again,—to-morrow, maybe. You might just say Mrs. Estalou was here, but—"

The actual significance of her words was withheld but her tone and the finality of her turning again toward the shabby, capable-looking old car at the curb carried a sense of panic and disaster to her listener. She went timidly closer and laid hold of a crisp fold of her skirt with a small sallow finger and thumb.

"Oh!" The large lady hesitated. "You want I

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should come in? You think your folk'll want to see me?"

Mindful of the message, with a tingle in her lean little body which was at once a reminiscence and a prophecy, Edwina nodded again and achieved a tremulous whisper—"My mummer . . . my grammer . . ."

"Well," the caller considered with maddening deliberation, "long's I'm here, might as well, I guess." She took the detaining hand in a warm, moist clasp and started back up the path.

The child, whose eyes were at a level with Mrs. Estalou's knees, discovered that the pale tan surface of the dress was liberally sprinkled with bright blue polka dots whose movement made her dizzy again.

"Hey!" the woman chided her gayly, giving her arm a gentle jerk. "Watch out where you're going! What's the matter with those feet? A great big girl with a grown-up name like Ed-winna, doesn't know how old she is and can't walk straight!" Then she peered down into her face and stood still once more, inquiring with kind fervor—"Why, hon'—are you sick?"

"*Hungry!*" It was a vehement whisper, followed instantly with an apprehensive glance toward the house and a rapid—"The-Lord-will-provide."

"Well, say!" Her new friend regarded her with tender and respectful admiration. "You're a real religious little girl, aren't you? But I can't figure how you'd be hungry this time of day. Haven't you had your breakfast?" When Edwina shook her head, her chin quivering, Mrs. Estalou bridled. "Well, *my* way'd be to feed my young one and redd up my house and *then* start to praying, but maybe it's different

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with—" She stopped to listen, for inside the shabby shack two voices were lifted in song, the one strong and strident, the other sweet and low.

"'Come and dine!' the Master calleth. 'Come and dine!' You may feast at Jesus' table all the time!
He who fed the multitude, turned the water into wine,
To the hungry calleth now—'Come and dine!'"

"Well, my *land!*" the large lady ejaculated. "Ten o'clock of a morning and this poor young one not fed yet!" In her warm disapproval she opened the door without stopping to knock and stepped heavily into the room.

Both of the kneeling women had their eyes tightly closed, their heads tipped backwards and their hands clasped rigidly beneath their chins. Utterly unmindful of the stranger's presence, they swung fervently into another verse:

"The disciples came to land,
Thus obeying Christ's command;
There they found their hearts' desire,
Bread and fish upon the fire—
'Come and dine!' the Master calleth. Come—'"

"If I'm intruding—" Mrs. Estalou began, diffidently.

The older woman, the one who was solid and thick and redly flushed, opened her eyes and stared at her blankly for an instant and then smiled and got quickly to her feet.

"Good morning, Sister! I hope I didn't keep you waiting! Did you knock more than once?" She drew

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difficult, wheezing breaths but appeared to ignore her disability entirely. "When we get to holding our little prayer and praise service, we just get carried so far away—Angie!" She spoke to her daughter, but the pale and exquisite girl, her white lids still lowered, seemed to be unaware that her mother had ceased singing and was carrying on the hymn alone.

"You may feast at Jesus' table all the time!"

The mother went close to her and laid a hand on her faintly golden head. "Angie! Angie, dear! We got comp'ny!"

Her daughter unveiled her very large, very light gray eyes slowly, but remained upon her knees, and kept her thin hands clasped at her throat. She looked at Mrs. Estalou and through and beyond her.

The mother looked from her to the caller. "That's the way she *is*," she explained, with an admixture of hospitable apology and tender pride. "Looks like she's just miles away from us, clear through the Pearly Gates! Now, Angie! Come, dear! Here's one of the Sisters come to call!" She bent over the girl and tugged her to her feet, wheezing painfully as she did so.

Angie's eyes, still upon the stranger, widened, and then contracted; she blinked them rapidly. Then they became normal in expression, and she smiled with unearthly sweetness. "I'm sorry . . ." she said in a gentle, tired voice. "Sister dear . . . sister *de-urrr* . . ." She put a great deal of soft intensity into the greeting.

"If I'm intruding—" the caller began again. There was a young bashfulness about her which was rather endearing, in spite of her mountainous bulk.

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"You are welcome, Sister!" The older woman set forward the firmer of the two chairs. "Were you at our meeting last night, Sister?"

"Yes, I was, and I thought you did fine, and so did lots of the folks! I'll tell you one thing—it's the first time old Pete Lacey was ever down on his knees in all his born days, the old rascal!" She beamed on them cordially. Her eyes were as round and as blue as the polka dots on her dress. "That's why I came by. Some of us ladies got to talking, and—and kind of worrying, not meaning any offense. We knew Lew Tully let you have this house—not that it was much of a *let*, at that!" She gave a comprehensive look about her and a contemptuous sniff which sat with comedy effect upon the infantile serenity of her pink face. "And we suspicioned that you folks didn't have any too much of this world's goods, and the little girl, just now, she let out that she was hungry, and she *looks* peaked enough, goodness knows, so if a little donation, accepted in the spirit it's meant—"

At the mention of the child the grandmother's gaze traveled to her and remained upon her very fixedly. "Little lamb of God!" she wheezed.

"The-Lord-will-provide!" Edwina responded instantly.

"There! If that isn't the cutest thing?" Mrs. Estalou demanded. "That's just what she said to me before, out in front! And her nothing but a baby, you might say, neither!"

"Babe," purred the older woman, "you tell sister what else you can say!" Then, as the child stared owlishly,—"*our—our—*"

"—Father-which-art-in-Heaven!" Then, fixing her

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desperate scrutiny on the blue polka dot eyes of her new friend, she added in a sharp whisper—“*Hungry!*” Once more she took hold of a stiff muslin fold of the skirt, and, like a little tug towing a great schooner, pulled Mrs. Estalou out into the kitchen.

“Oh, my soul and senses!” the lady moaned. “I never dreamed—none of us ever did—”

Edwina led her to the pile of trash before she released her. Then she stooped, lost her balance and sat dizzily down on the floor, picked up the smartly patterned box which had once held gingersnaps and gravely demonstrated that there were no more crumbs to be had, even after the most violent shaking.

Chapter II

WHEN they returned to the other room Mrs. Estalou's diffidence had dropped away. There was determination in both of her rosy chins, even though the blue dots swam mistily in tears.

She advanced upon the grandmother with a militant tread. "Now, Mrs.—I don't know as I caught your name?"

"Meeker. Mrs. Mary Meeker, laborer in His vineyard."

"All right, Mrs. Meeker. I don't want to overstep, and I guess anybody that knows me will tell you I'm not one to poke my nose in where it doesn't belong. But when it comes to the salt of the earth going hungry, and a poor little innocent young one, why—"

"We are not complaining, sister," the older woman reminded her. "When you came, in the goodness of your heart, you found us holding our simple little service of prayer and praise, even though no mortal food had passed our lips since yesterday noon, and then no more than would keep a bird alive!"

"I know it!" The caller gulped, feelingly. "Didn't I hear you with my own ears thanking the Lord for what you didn't have,—and singing 'Come and dine!' when your stomachs must of thought your throats was cut!" She choked with warm emotion and bent over the child while she groped for her composure.

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"Dear sister," the lovely pale girl murmured. "Sister *de-urr*."

"Don't you 'dear sister' me, now," Mrs. Estalou was merry again, "until you've got something to 'dear sister' me for, and that's why I'm going to make tracks for market. I got full authority for some of the other ladies, to go right ahead, if things was as we suspicioned they might be. So I'll bid you good-day, Mrs. Meeker, and you, Miss—Mrs.—?" She was embarrassed once more.

"Willow," the grandmother answered. "Mrs. Willow. Daughter's a little widow. Yes. Yes! A child wife and a girl widow. Not that we complain, sister, or dispute with Jehovah! The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord! You saw even this little lamb's faith, didn't you, sister?"

"I should say I did!" The large lady fairly melted over Edwina. "And she hasn't any papa, neither!"

"Babe," exhorted Mrs. Meeker, "you tell sister where your father is!"

The little girl, still clinging tightly to the great warm bulk which seemed to promise rescue and sanctuary, said obediently—"Our-Father-which-art-in-Heaven. *My-father-who-is-in-heaven!*"

"You cute *thing!*" Mrs. Estalou was rapturous. "Well, now, I'm off to market, trot-trot to market, Ed-winna and you wait! You watch! You said the Lord would provide, and you just see if He don't!" She went buoyantly away, billowing through the narrow door and across the little porch and down the three steps and down the dusty path like a gayly spotted balloon, and the empty house was suddenly filled with complacency and approval.

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"Now, then, what'd I tell you?" the grandmother trumpeted. "Angie, you were wonderful! Oh, Angie, when you can do like that! And when you can do like that, and then you get mean and mulish and won't—why, I should think you'd expect God to up and strike you dead!" For an instant she continued to gaze at her with mingled satisfaction and exasperation, and then she wheeled, wheezing, to purr commendation upon her granddaughter. "And Babe was a good girl, too! Little lamb of God! Now, Edwina, you can go on out and set on the stoop and watch, like the kind sister said!"

The child, thankfully obeying, heard her voice going on and on in a steady murmur. She continued to hear it, even after she sat down on the bottom step, her small, sallow hands limp in her lap, palms upward. It was a rippling stream of exultation, of plan and prophecy, with now and then a softer note from the girl, protest, half-hearted, wanting to be overborne.

The day was as hard and as bright as before, and steadily growing warmer, and Edwina's chin sank on her chest. A sedately patterned butterfly in dull brown and black pricked out with pale yellow flew up the barren front yard and down again, and a heavy-bodied bluebottle fly came and settled in one of her hands, working industriously, finding a ghost of gingersnap which had eluded her larger tongue. The child dozed, fitfully at first, then more solidly.

The sound of brisk and heavy feet roused her. She would never forget, so long as she lived, the apparition which stood before her, towering over her. She was very tiny, and she was seated on the lowest step, and he was an exceptionally tall man. On each arm he

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carried a huge and heavily laden market basket. One sagged with potatoes and small sacks of meal and a ham; the other was heaped high with cans and cartons which bore gaudy labels, and it bloomed with crimson beets and golden carrots and yellow and white celery, and out from under one of his arms stuck the saffron colored legs and stiff claws of a large fowl.

The delivery man wore no hat, and his hair, which was a coppery, fiery red shone about his face like a nimbus in the sun's glare. He opened his lips and his smile was a gleam of golden teeth.

"Meekers'?" He had a singularly deep, reverberating voice which seemed to pierce through and through her flat little chest and echo against the steps behind her. "Meekers live here?"

She got to her feet, staring, her heart in her throat, tried to take a backward step, stumbled, fell forward, picked herself up, scrambled up the steps and over the porch emitting a gasping, stifled shriek—

"Mummer! Grammer! *Here's the Lord!*"

No one laughed at her. No one corrected her or explained, either then or thereafter. There were two reasons for this: first, because the man from the market was very deaf and had not heard her at all, and second, because she had fainted in a small, limp heap across the threshold. By the time she opened her eyes, after Angie's tearful ministrations with a wet handkerchief and a folded newspaper fan, and sat up and staggered to her feet and looked out, the man had vanished utterly from porch and path and street, and the hollow little house seemed to be full and running over with food and the heartening smell of food, and her grand-

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mother was striving with a fire in the rusty and battered stove.

Her mother brought her milk in a tin cup, slopping it over in her pitiful haste, and tore the end out of a carton of crackers, and Edwina ate like a small famished beast, and the late wonder was thickly overlaid with warm animal contentment and lassitude. She fell swiftly asleep and woke to eat again, and went to bed in the middle of the afternoon and slept straight through until early morning.

But the wonder returned to her again and again in the months and years which followed, piercingly, poignantly, blindingly, sometimes at the sudden sound of heavy, hurrying feet, sometimes at a quickly wafted scent of food, sometimes when she was sharply roused after dozing in the hot sun; often when her lean little body was taut with hunger.

She never discussed it with her relatives because it was an accepted fact and needed no argument or ramification—the Lord would and did provide, moving in a mysterious way His wonders to perform—and more especially because her conversation was not encouraged. Children, Mrs. Meeker held, should be seen as unobtrusively as possible and heard only in the carefully rehearsed and edifying scraps of Scripture.

It became, therefore, the corner stone of her young life's structure, unseen but potent.

One other occasion was to stand out vividly in her remembrances, long after Mrs. Estalou and the blue polka dots and the empty house were dimmed in sketchy memories. It was another hasty exodus; another season of ceaseless conversations between her elders, fretful and pleading and filled with recrimina-

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tions. They were making a weary and warm all-day journey on a day coach. There was a twenty-minute stop at noon at a station which had a lunch counter, and a man in a white apron stood outside the door, beating on a triangle, but Mrs. Meeker and her daughter and granddaughter remained in the shabby red plush seats.

Angie, her hat off, her pale, silver-gilt hair mussed childishly about her face, lay back in the limp, curious, disembodied tiredness which often overtook her. There was a translucence about her which arrested attention. A traveling salesman had twice insisted during the forenoon on bringing her cups of water, and he would undoubtedly have proffered refreshment now, save for the fact that he had left the train at this town.

Edwina, catching a pungent smell of coffee from the frequently swinging door, through their open window, began to whimper and was promptly rebuked by her grandmother. "Now, Babe, you hush up! You know as well as I do that Grammer hasn't got a nickel to spend on you to-day. We'll be in Deerville by supper time, and some of the sisters'll be meeting us, and you'll just have to hold your horses till then, that's all! —Now, *hush*, I said! I never saw such a young one; a person'd think you was the only person in the world that got hungry or tired. Look how you're fretting your poor Mummer!"

Angie had indeed lowered her full white lids over her sad eyes and was frowning faintly.

"And her having to be fresh for the meeting to-night, and all! I should think you'd be ashamed. Now you go on down to that seat at the end of the car and set still and try to keep your mind on higher things, and just remember what Grammer's taught you so many,

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many times, though a body wouldn't think it, the ungrateful way you act!"

So the child left them and went down the aisle and took the last seat, and after the train got under way again in a long straight stretch she marveled to see the tracks running together behind her, and was thankful for the Providence which was vouchsafing them to flee sway from the pointed trap instead of into it.

This gratitude, however, was not sufficient to subdue her appetite, and fixed gazing at the shining rails made her dizzy, so she shut her eyes very tightly, as her relatives did in their devotions, and began to pray fervently the prayer of affirmation and supplication.

The-Lord-will-provide.

Please, de-urr Lord, provide!

There was a touch on her shoulder, presently, and a youth stood beside her in the aisle with a basket on his arm. She had not seen him before, because he had come aboard only at the last station, for the more populous and prosperous half of the day's run. He was a big, blond boy with a lot of untidy fair hair, and there were two gold teeth to illumine his genial grin.

"'Lo, kid! You hungry? I betcher! Say, lookit! Here's a box of salted peanuts a guy forgot—only et three or four, I guess. And this banana's O.K. if you just don't eat the black end, see? Want 'em? What'd you say?"

She said, looking at him with respectful rapture—"Lord, I thank Thee!"—but so indistinctly that he did not get the exact words and rallied her good-naturedly on being such a big kid and not talking plain! Then he went away and she did not see him again. Mysterious ways indeed, but the peanuts were salty and crisp

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and satisfying, and the banana, eaten dangerously down to the dark tip, was filling, and she fell into a waking and dozing dream of blurred landscape and comfortable conviction that always, when you couldn't bear it any longer, God came with a basket. . . .

A bevy of women and a tall, very thin elderly man met them at the station. "I am Brother Beriah Turner," he said, holding out a curiously pallid hand which was coldly damp to the touch. "I make you welcome to our home and to our hearts. My sister, Mrs. Mollie Bascom, keeps house for me, and under our simple but hospitable roof you will sojourn while here."

One of the women had a new and shining automobile and Brother Beriah handed the child's mother and grandmother and herself into the rear seat and took his place beside the driver. He talked to Mrs. Meeker chiefly, but he kept his eyes constantly on her daughter, twisting about.

"So, you are Angela!" he stated gravely. His eyes were a faded blue, watery and faintly red about the rims. "A well chosen name, Sister Meeker! The Lord must have put a premonition in your heart. *My name has a sad significance. You will find it in First Chronicles, Seventh Chapter and Twenty-third verse. My parents had buried six children before I was born, and lost all their worldly goods as well. —'and he called his name Beriah, because it went evil with his house.'* And the blessing of the Lord was upon my birth, for my father prospered again, in moderation, and then a daughter was born to them, fifteen years younger than myself,—my sister, Widow Bascom, a

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good woman, but not—" he shook his head—" a godly one."

Angie was palely weary, and leaned languidly back in the seat, drooping against her mother's solid shoulder.

"You are tired, Sister Angela?" Brother Beriah's voice vibrated with sympathy.

"Yes," she smiled at him with the same unearthly sweetness she had once bestowed upon Mrs. Estalou, "but it doesn't matter. . . ."

"You'll think it don't matter when you see her and hear her in meeting to-night, Brother Beriah!" her mother wheezed eagerly. "Angie may be frail in the flesh, but the spirit is mighty, praise God."

The old man transferred his attention briefly to her. "Asthma, Sister Meeker?"

She nodded, flushed more hotly.

"The hand of the Lord is sometimes heavy," he said contentedly. "I, myself, am invalided home from the foreign mission fields. Yes. My kidneys. And I buried my sainted wife there. Dysentery." The faded eyes which looked the color of well washed chambray, went back to the girl. "You, too, have lost your mate, Sister Angela?"

Angie bowed her head and did not lift it again for a long moment.

"So young," he murmured, "to be alone so long. . . . Then this dear child of grace is fatherless?"

"Edwina!" the grandmother prodded.

"Our-Father-which-art-in-Heaven!— *My-father-who-is-in-heaven,*" the child produced promptly.

"Ah . . ." he gave her a grieved look, but his whole preoccupation was with her mother, whom he almost

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lifted from the machine when it stopped before a comfortable, two-storied white house with green blinds and a cheerful garden. He kept her thin arm in his hand as they went up a neatly graveled path and mounted shallow steps to the porch.

A plump woman with what was presently seen to be a habitual look of good-natured and tolerant amusement opened the door for them. "How'do, everybody! Walk right in! You're just as welcome as can be, every last one of you! Walk right upstairs, and the first two rooms to your right—there's two big beds and one little one for Sis', and suit yourselves about choosing!" She followed them up, carrying their meager luggage. "No, no—let me! You're all tuckered out from your trip, and Beriah's weak as a cat, and I'm strong as a horse!"

They washed their faces and hands in the big bathroom down the hall, and Angie put on the limp white dress which clung so closely and revealingly to her beautiful bones, before they went ravenously down to supper. The child had never dreamed that there was so much food in the world. There were no paper cartons or tin cans or can openers in sight; no tin cups. The table was covered with a gay cloth, white, bordered with a checkered pattern in red and yellow and black, and there were big folded napkins at each place, white, and soft and smooth to the touch. Even when cornucopias of plenty had emptied upon them, their fare had been poor, for the grandmother was a hasty and impatient cook and food was underdone or scorched, and for the most part they ate things which required no preparation.

Now Mrs. Meeker ate until she was mottled with a

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purple flush and wheezed more violently than her granddaughter had ever heard her, and even Angie ate with delicate fervor, and Edwina herself consumed fried chicken and cream gravy and mashed potatoes golden flecked with butter, endless hot biscuits and honey and preserves, three kinds of vegetables, two great glasses of rich milk, a generous wedge of pie and a slice of three-storied cake until her cheeks were scarlet and her whole body felt tight and distended to the point of bursting.

Mrs. Mollie Bascom observed the appetites of her guests with her tolerant satisfaction. "Have some more!" she kept urging. "I made 'em to eat! Plenty more in the kitchen! Those biscuits are small, Mrs. Willow! Come, Sis', pass up your plate! This stuff won't keep!"

The child, marveling that any one could spare time for speech, heard her grandmother gasp: "You cert'ny are a good cook, Sister Bascom!"

"Well, cooking comes easy to me, if I do say it," the hostess admitted complacently, "and I always did like to cook, when I have the things to do with. And Beriah, I will say for him, Beriah's a good provider!"

Mrs. Meeker severely insisted that Edwina attend the services at eight o'clock in the big front parlor closely filled with women interspersed with men, but she fell asleep during the first hymn, and Mrs. Bascom, who was not taking part beyond bringing in extra chairs and greeting people with her tolerant amusement, picked her up quietly, carried her upstairs and put her to bed. She shook her head over the condition of her undergarments and her small, stringy body. "Ought to have a good hot soaking bath," she clucked,

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“but I guess you’re too beat out, and morning’ll do!
Good night, and sleep tight!”

The little girl’s sharp bones sank rapturously into the unaccustomed softness, but before she slipped into deep and final sleep she added a new line to her litany:

“The-Lord-will-provide.”

“Brother Beriah is a *good* provider!”

Chapter III

EDWINA WILLOW, in the blissful, full-fed days and weeks which followed, elevated a new deity and worshiped and adored him impartially with the old one.

The Lord, and Brother Beriah.

Not quite impartially, perhaps, for she was obliged to admit, after careful weighing and balancing, that Brother Beriah was decidedly the better provider of the two. The Lord, to be sure, was strong on rescue, appearing with His basket of plenty with sudden and dramatic effect in moments of direst need, but His provisions were cold and uncooked and satisfied only the first and most ravenous pangs of hunger, whereas Brother Beriah's were hot and succulent, rich, sweet, melt-in-the-mouth, to be devoutly enjoyed long after the buttoned belt of your petticoat was taut about your stomach.

She partook earnestly of this bounty three times a day, and once at least between breakfast and dinner and dinner and supper, for Mrs. Mollie Bascom called her cordially into the kitchen and proffered bread and molasses, bread and sugar, bread and honey, fresh cookies, doughnuts just out of the fat and still sizzling delightfully.

"'Lo, Sis'!" she always said. "Want a piece?" Then she would regard her approvingly with her sharp, kindly eyes. "Filling out, I do declare! Don't look

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much like the picked pigeon that I lugged upstairs and put to bed that first night! Now you run on outside and play some more. All you needed to make a right nice looking young one out of you was good, regular eating and fresh air and hot suds!"

The child went gladly into the garden. It was the first garden which she had ever known with any degree of intimacy and she admired with equal fervor the flowers, and the swing and the sand-box which Brother Beriah had ordered installed for her pleasure, and spent all her waking hours out-of-doors. Some time during each forenoon her grandmother came out to find her and sat down on a green bench with a primer and a pencil and tablet and gave her an uneasy forty-minute period of instruction.

This was the result of Mrs. Mollie Bascom's persistent suggestion that Edwina should be sent to school. "It's a scandal, what she don't know, at her age," she had urged good-humoredly, "and what she needs, too, is company. Other young ones of her own age—or even younger, seeing she's missed so much. Do her good. I'll take her myself and get her started, if you say the word!"

Mrs. Meeker had refused, appreciatively, for two reasons. In the first place, their stay in Deerville was brief and uncertain. "We never know, doing the Lord's work like we are, when—or where to—the next call'll come. We are pilgrims and strangers who can tarry but a night. I believe I could eat a mite more of that meat, Sister Bascom!" She passed her plate.

"Well, I guess likely you'll tarry a while yet," returned her hostess with entirely good-humored irony, heaping it high with pot roast and potatoes and car-

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rots browned in the pan. "Meetings going good, all of you getting fat and hearty, and Beriah pleased to the marrow of his bones. Help yourself to the pickled peaches. If you don't see what Beriah's got in his mind's eye, why, then, there's something wrong with your eyesight, that's all! There's more gingerbread in the kitchen."

Mrs. Meeker shot a hasty, apprehensive glance at her daughter but Angie was dreamily devouring her dinner and did not appear to be listening. Brother Beriah was away for the day. "Oh, of course, we expect to stay as long as our labors appear to be blessed," she admitted quickly. "But the main reason for keeping Babe at home is that we want she should preserve her innocence. She's our one ewe lamb, and we want to keep her unspotted from the world!"

"Well, I should want her spotted here and there with a little education if she was mine, which she's not," commented Mrs. Bascom, dryly. "But, land, she's smart, and she'll pick up enough, I expect. Main thing, now, is to feed her up and keep her outdoors."

So Edwina ate enormously and slept soundly round the clock and stayed in the garden all day long, and the sallow pallor of her skin cleared to a healthy golden amber.

"Kind of a goldy girl all over, you are!" her hostess regarded her kindly one warm morning. "Hair's gold—not that fady, silvery color your mummer's is, but bright, bronzey gold. Sometimes in the sun it's like new minted money. And your skin's gold, and your eyes, they're that nice goldy yellow like animals' are. Goldie! That's a cute name for you—nicer'n Edwina! You're not like your mummer nor *her*

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mother. Ever hear 'em say what kind of a looking feller your father was?" She listened and laughed. "Guess you don't know anything about him but his *address*, do you? Willow sounds American enough, all right, but I have a kind of feeling you've got rich foreign blood in your veins."

One day Mrs. Meeker moved Edwina's little bed out of Angie's room and her own big bed into it. "Me and your mummer have lots of things to talk about, nights, when you're asleep, Babe," she explained, and the child noticed, thereafter, that there was a yellow line of light under the door between them always, it seemed, no matter how late in the night she wakened at the sound of words or weeping, for Angie had taken to tears again.

This was incomprehensible to Edwina. Tears had been associated only with hunger and hollow houses and dusty day coaches; why cry when there was nothing left in the full-fed, kindly world to cry for?

But one night her mother's woe was so violent that she jumped out of bed and crept to the door and put her ear against it without a particle of compunction. No unhappiness or hardship had ever been withheld from her—why should this noisy grief?

"I can't, I can't, I *can't!*" her mother was sobbing. "I won't, I tell you! I won't! I'm not going to!"

"Sh . . . Angie, hush, *hush!* You want to rouse up the whole household! Now, dearie, mother isn't thinking of anything but your own best good, you know that, don't you?" She waited a moment. "*Don't* you?"

"I know I'm not going to do it," the answer came sullenly, "not if you talk your head off, and you can't

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make me, and you know you can't make me! And you're terrible to even want to!" She began to cry again. "You'd ought to be *ashamed!*"

"All right, then, if you don't—what's going to become of us? Tell me that, Angie Willow?—Angie *Meeker!* The road again! It's come to that point, sure as gun's iron! You may put it off a few hours or a few days, maybe, but either *you do*—or *we go!*"

The child stood shivering in her nightdress, hoping ardently that her mother would do it, whatever it was. She began to weep herself, softly and silently, at the thought of being turned out of Paradise.

"We go, and we go empty-handed, for while we've lived fat and easy, we haven't taken up a cent for ourselves here. You know that as well as I do, Angie. Empty-handed. Beginning all over. Some bum town—an old rattle-trap house for nothing and not worth that, smirky, smart-aleck women bringing in a little mess of food—all the work and worry over again, and for what? My heavens, Angie Meeker—" she was wheezing painfully with her growing vehemence—"when you think of you having a chance like this, for your own sake, and for your poor old mother's sake that's stood by you through thick and thin, and for your innocent babe's sake, and then you sitting there, stubborn as a mule and selfish—why, I should think you'd expect to have God up and strike you dead!"

There was a period of quiet then, the weeper drawing long quivering breaths. Edwina grew hopeful.

The older woman resumed. "Look at this house, all clear, and the size of the lot—three lots, really, and in a part of town that's getting more valuable every

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day. And two-three good pieces of renting property downtown, too, I'm told, and a good big fat balance in the bank! *Think* of it, Angie!"

Silence.

"And good as gold. One of the saints of the earth, if there ever was one. Free with money and a good provider!"

The child jerked into sharper attention. It must have to do, then, with either the Lord or Brother Beriah!

There was another silence, and then Angie's voice, small, smothered sounding. "But he's—he must be lots over sixty!"

"Well, that's *it!* And a *sick man!* That's what I've been trying and trying my best to get you to consider! It wouldn't be—it couldn't possibly be—in the nature of things—for *long*. Not wishing the dear old gentleman any harm—grateful to him as a body could ever be—*esteeming* him—still, as a matter of common sense—a year, maybe two, Angie! What's that out of your lifetime?" There was the longest pause which had yet occurred and then Edwina heard a new note in her grandmother's voice. It sounded warm and pleased and proud. "There, now, dearie, we won't talk any more to-night! You just cuddle down and get to sleep, and you trust your good, faithful mother like you always have!"

"He—his hands are *damp* . . ." said Angie in the same curious tone.

"Well, this house isn't damp! And the business property isn't damp!" The yellow line vanished under the door and there was the creak of springs beneath a heavy body. "Don't you go getting silly, now, Angie

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Meeker, about things that don't matter a mite. You just go to sleep."

Edwina could hear her grandmother wheezing as long as she stood there, but her mother had stopped crying, so she crept back to bed, chilled and anxious, wishing earnestly that she might dry Brother Beriah's hands since they made her mother unhappy, and worrying for almost ten minutes before she fell asleep.

Mrs. Mollie Bascom came out next morning while the child was playing in the garden and sat on the green bench and watched her with her characteristic expression. "Well, Goldie, I thought I'd come out and see what you were up to, whilst my pie was baking. Blackberry pie, Goldie!" She leaned over to see what was happening to the little old broken bisque doll. "Why, what in time are you doing?"

"I'm Brother Beriah," said Edwina gravely, "burying my sainted wife on India's coral strand. Dysentery."

Brother Beriah's sister flung back her head and laughed long and loud. "If you haven't got a memory like a parrot I wouldn't say so! Well, it'll come in handy, all right, if you aim to be a preacher woman. It's memory, mostly, far's I can see—that and nerve!"

"And sometimes," the child went on, conscientiously trying to entertain the giver of so many bounties, "I play that Esther is Mummer and I am God and I up and strike her dead."

"Well, forever more! What in time *for*?"

Edwina did not seem to be very clear. "Well, because she won't," she replied doubtfully.

"Won't—*what*?"

The little girl shook her head. "Why—she can, and

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it's such a wonderful chance and they haven't picked up any money themselves—but she just won't. His hands are damp."

Mrs. Mollie Bascom's comely face got very red and she jumped to her feet and then sat down again and folded her firm, capable looking hands on her brown gingham lap. "So, that's it," she said. "It's come to a head, then. And his hands are damp. Well—I guess they won't be damp enough." She was silent for a long moment, her mouth pressed into a hard line, and then her habitual look of comfortable kindness came back, smoothing out the temporary harshness. "Well, I guess they won't be damp enough to hinder," she chuckled. Then she sighed once or twice, but the usual expression held.

Presently the gate clicked and a thin, dark woman came into the pleasant garden, walking quickly, an acid frown on her face, so that she seemed sharply out of place in the warm peacefulness of it.

"Mollie Bascom," she began without preamble, "do you see where things are headed in this household?"

"Well, I've still got my eyesight, Ellie," the other replied, placidly.

"And you don't lift a hand to prevent it?" Her small, almost black eyes snapped angrily.

Mrs. Bascom lifted a plump shoulder instead. "Much good it would do, Ellie. No fool like an old fool; you know that. But it's his own business, and she's a pretty piece; sweet-pretty, and real gentle and easy-going. If it wasn't for certain other parties—older parties—" she looked toward Edwina who was listening raptly and murmured—"Little pitchers—"

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She got slowly to her feet. "I have a pie in the oven, Ellie; come on in the kitchen while I look at it."

But Miss Meers could not seem to walk and expostulate hotly at the same time, so they stood still in the path, at a little distance, and the child heard her friend say: "Oh, of course it's silly,—my stars! *Crazy!* And I'd lots lieber see you here, if anybody, Ellie; you know that. Anybody'd be silly, I feel, but you'd be a good deal less silly. And I will admit you had your reasons for thinking it might be you." Then they moved on and disappeared round the back of the house, and Edwina went back to Brother Beriah's sainted wife.

About ten days later the child sensed an air of muffled excitement all through the big white house. Her mother had cried a good deal the night before, but she was smiling with her most other-worldly sweetness in the morning, and her grandmother was wheezing exultantly as she went from room to room at the short-gearred trot which always marked dramatic moments for her, and Mollie Bascom was rather silent.

In the afternoon Angie put on a new soft dress of silvery gray stuff and a long cape, shirred about the shoulders, to match, and a little close gray hat with velvet forget-me-nots on the crown, kissed Edwina and called her her precious babe, and got into a machine beside Brother Beriah and drove away.

The little girl was anxious, because his hand, shaking hers briefly and limply in farewell, was quite as damp as ever, and she mentioned the fact to her grandmother, but Mrs. Meeker, waving them out of sight, caught up her granddaughter in a rare embrace with her other arm, and wheezed that she must hush up and never make remarks about people, but that

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she was a little lamb of God and everything was all right, now!

Turning, she found Mrs. Mollie Bascom watching them, and she bridled a little and flushed redly. "Well, now, I suppose this isn't what you'd looked forward to, Sister Bascom, but—"

Her hostess interrupted her. "Now, don't start talking in that tone, Mrs. Meeker," she said, mildly. "I guess if we're all going to keep on under the same roof—and I guess we are, for the present, anyway—we might as well treat each other as easy and pleasant as we can. No, I didn't look forward to this, I'm free to admit, but on the other hand, Beriah never made me any promises, I must say that. And I can't hold him to account for what I may have figured on and hoped. I've got my husband's pension, and my house back in Altura is clear. It's rented now, but I can go back there next spring and take boarders again, like I always did. *I'm* all right. And this thing is done and can't be undone, so let's take it as easy as we can, I say. Goldie, you run on in the kitchen and I'll come and give you three cookies." When the child was out of hearing she spoke again. "And if you'll take a friendly hint—he's jealous, Beriah is, for all he looks so milk and watery, as a Bengal tiger. You'll feel it, and the young one will, so I'd keep out from under foot, if I was you." Then she went after the cookies, her face placid as usual.

Mr. and Mrs. Beriah Turner came back in a week, and Edwina was surprised to find that her little bed was in the room with her grandmother's big one, and she never knew whether her mother cried in the night any more or not. She made the mistake of asking

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Brother Beriah and was terrified at his swift crossness. She learned, with the wariness of a young animal, to keep out of his way, after that: he looked at her, out of his faded eyes, with a strange animosity which terrified her, and once, stumbling over her in a dark hall, he gave way to a fuming and puerile burst of temper. Much of what he said was incomprehensible to her, but one stark new idea stood forth, and before she fell asleep that night she revised her litany:

The-Lord-will-provide.

Brother Beriah is a *good* provider.

Our-Father-which-art-in-Heaven.

My father who *is* in hell!

Chapter IV

THE animosity of her stepfather did little to dim Edwina's happiness. She merely kept out of sight and sound of him as much as possible, and his new attitude brought about no diminution of her worshipful gratitude, because he continued to be the best of providers. She sat beside and beyond Mrs. Mollie Bascom at the table, screened by her comfortable bulk, and by addressing herself earnestly to her food she rarely came under his irascible attention.

Indeed, she continued to divide her allegiance between him and the Lord, giving Brother Beriah a shade the better of it, for such Scriptural gleanings as she picked up convinced her that Jehovah was an even more irate personage, greatly given to swallowing up cities with fire and brimstone, to sending plagues and striking people dead.

She rather imagined that Brother Beriah had it in his mind to up and strike her dead, but she was not actively worried about it, feeling secure in her own nimbleness and the championship of her hostess, but she did feel an active anxiety about her mother, who appeared to take reckless chances.

Nevertheless, Angie seemed to prosper. She and her husband went frequently to the city, a half day's journey from Deerville, and she always came back with something new to wear—lovely, soft shimmering materials for the meetings, quaint little frocks for the

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house which left her delicate throat and arms bare.

These purchases brought forth caustic comment from Miss Ella Meers to Mrs. Bascom in the garden or in the kitchen.

"Spending his money like a drunken sailor!" she would say, venomously.

"Oh, well," the other would hunch an indulgent shoulder. "Poor old Beri', he likes to see her look pretty, and she cert'ny does! Aggie, you know, was plain as a pikestaff. He used to try his level best to get her to fix up a little, but she was just too saintly for any mortal use."

"Well, this one isn't, you can tell your folks!"

"Oh, Ellie, now, I don't know! She's—"

"Well, I know, Mollie Bascom, and so do you, unless you're blinder'n a bat! They're a smooth pair, she and that old wheezer of a mother of hers!" The thin woman would jerk and twitch with the vehemence of her dislike and distrust.

"Anyhow, you'll have to admit in all fairness, Ellie, the church never did so well since it was founded!" Mrs. Bascom squatted before the oven and tried a cake with a straw, her merry face flushing hotly. "She cert'ny draws 'em!"

"Oh, of course—a novelty! Anything for a sensation! The Word of God out of the mouth of a plain, decent, dignified preacher isn't enough for 'em!"

"No, it's not," agreed her neighbor, peacefully. "That's a fact, Ellie: that's how people *are*." She seemed to have a solid, amiable acceptance of the facts of life which irritated rather than soothed the thin, dark woman. Nothing seemed to concern her particularly except getting three varied and unfailingly deli-

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cious meals onto her table every day, getting people out into the sunshine, getting them into hot baths or tucked up in warm beds. She was busying herself at that time, between the cooking and serving and clearing up of meals, with four or five little dresses for Edwina. There were two plaid gingham in yellow and white, a sulphur-colored dotted swiss, some quaint sprigged prints.

"I don't hold with tricking children out and making them vain," said Mrs. Meeker, sententiously.

"Don't you?" Mrs. Bascom wanted to know, biting off a yellow thread with strong, uneven white teeth. "Well, now!"

Angie, looking on with a faint and languid interest, said she would never have thought of those shades for Babe, who had been always a sallow child. Pink, perhaps—

"Yellow to yellow makes yellow look white," her sister-in-law quoted. "Didn't you never hear that?" She pushed open the screen door and called Edwina in for a fitting. "Goldie! Come on in and try on!"

Mrs. Meeker disapproved strongly but she was cautious about it. "I'd a lot liefer have the child concerned with the beauty of holiness, Sister Bascom!"

"Well, I expect you *would*," the seamstress conceded reasonably. "That being your line. Me, now," she chuckled at her own wit, "I always did set great store by the holiness of beauty! Land—I get as much fun out of looking at Angie as Beri' does!"

The child's world was entirely happy for many weeks, and then her sky was clouded over by the realization that her mother had taken to tears again. Edwina didn't know anything about the nights, but

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the days were damp—damper than Brother Beriah's hands had ever been. Angie did not appear until nearly noon, and then she was sullen, sodden with weeping, her beauty blurred. Brother Beriah, on the other hand, displayed a decidedly augmented cheerfulness. There was a swifter and more elastic carriage of his long, thin figure, a spring in his walk, a gleam in his pale eye, a jauntiness in the whole gentleman. He went away to the city and came back with a new suit in a gray-tan mixture and three distinctly gay and youthful neckties which he wore with it in rotation. He had never been so sprightly and so pleasant, and he insisted on carrying up a laden breakfast tray every morning to Angie, his high spirits only a trifle lowered on invariably bringing it back untouched save for a half_cup of Mrs. Mollie Bascom's golden coffee.

Most amazing of all was his changed demeanor toward Edwina. He did not display affection or approval, but he now regarded her with a bright and not unamiable indifference; she no longer appeared to annoy him. Once, coming out into the kitchen when Mrs. Bascom was trying on one of the new little yellow dresses, he cleared his throat benevolently.

"That's right, Sister Mollie! That's right! The child must be suitably attired for all occasions—not elaborately—" his vision seemed to embrace the range of the gingham and the sulphur-colored dotted swiss—"but suitably. Send the bills to me, Sister Mollie—positively—all the bills to me. When I have once assumed a burden, I am not one to shirk any part of it."

He went away with his new, lifting step, and his sister gave vent to one of her low, delighted chuckles as she pulled the dress off over Edwina's head. "Feel-

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ing pretty neat, these days, Beri' is; just too neat for any good use! Oh, well—land! Poor old fellow!”

Miss Ella Meers seemed to find fresh fuel for wrath and disgust, the child discovered, both in her mother's tears and her stepfather's complacency, but she could see that her hostess discouraged conversation in her presence on the subject, and presently the new state of affairs became an accepted fact.

Angie stayed away from the meetings and Mrs. Meeker endeavored to take her place, but not, Edwina gathered, with any great degree of success or popularity, and there was much rejoicing when her daughter was able to resume her duties. Brother Beriah had brought her an exquisite ring—a deep amethyst surrounded by tiny diamonds and set in platinum, and this seemed to have helped in restoring her serenity, but Edwina observed with regret that she did not wear it during the services. She thought it would have flashed very beautifully on her mother's slim white hand, lifted in prayer and exhortation.

She herself went regularly to the meetings, sometimes sitting mously quiet upon the platform beside her grandmother, oftener in the congregation, in the front row, where she had to tip her head back at a sharp angle in order to see her mother's face, and it was more comfortable and likewise more entertaining to gaze at the people about her.

Miss Ella Meers and several other women who, while very different in size, age, complexion, were alike in a facial expression of contemptuous skepticism, always sat together, and whispered to each other in what Edwina, as a well-conducted lamb of God, considered a reprehensible manner.

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But the defection of the few was richly overlaid by the devotion of the many. The church seemed fairly to throb and pulse with it when Angie stood up at the pulpit in her shimmering white robe, the smile of unearthly sweetness on her perfect lips, her full white lids lowered over her light gray eyes. Handkerchiefs were almost constantly in action, and frequently the more impressionable sobbed aloud, and certain of the more vehement ones shouted: "Hallelujah!" and "Amen!" and "Praise the Lord!" whenever they were especially moved.

Edwina delighted in these dramatic episodes, and felt a tingling sensation up and down her spine, a prickling of the scalp, and sometimes actual goose flesh upon her stomach in the high tension of the moment. There began to thrive within her a passionate and worshipful admiration of her mother which very nearly elevated her to a place beside the two established deities, and she learned to submit with complacency to the head-pattings and God-blessings of the faithful bestowed upon herself, and to return with interest the malevolent looks of Miss Meers and her cohorts.

One Sunday evening, toward the close of the services, when Angie had finished a fervent prayer in her velvety voice and Mrs. Meeker had wheezed her postscript to it and Brother Beriah had invited the soul sick and sin weary to come forward and kneel at the Throne of Grace, there was an unwonted commotion at the rear of the church, and a large, gaunt woman was seen to be hobbling rapidly up the aisle, calling out hysterically as she came:

"I'm coming! Wait for me, Sister! Wait for me, Sister Angela! I want help and healing! I want the

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laying on of hands!" She came plunging on, pushing her way ruthlessly past the calmer ones, and instead of kneeling before the pulpit as was the established custom she went swarming up the steps and cast herself, groveling, at Angie's feet.

It was one of the occasions when Edwina sat in the front row and she watched the strange creature with terror and delight.

"Sister Angela! No, not Angela,—*Angel!* That's what you are—a white, shining angel!" the haggard woman sobbed. "Angel! Put your hands on my aching old bones! The Good Book says the word was made flesh! I want the laying on of hands!" Her weeping grew wilder. "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief! I want the laying on of hands!"

It seemed to the breathlessly watching child that her mother was badly frightened and her heart contracted with tenderness for her. She saw her shrink back, away from the clutching hands with their distorted joints, saw her throw a distracted, appealing look toward Brother Beriah and—apparently finding no help there—turn to her mother.

Edwina could not see the scrutiny which passed between Angie and Mrs. Meeker, but in an instant Angie turned back to the suppliant and bent over her, putting her beautiful hands on the bowed head, on the shaking shoulders, murmuring words which did not carry to the raptly listening congregation. The child wished regretfully that her mother had worn her amethyst and diamond ring: it would have sparkled so gloriously with the gestures she was making.

Suddenly the woman ceased her pitiful sobbing and gave a glad shout. "I'm healed! Glory be to God and

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his blessed white angel! I'm healed. *Healed!* I can feel it in my bones, in the marrow of my bones, in my broken heart, in my sick soul! Healed! Healed! Healed!"

She was standing erect now, flinging her arms over her head, and Edwina could see little bubbles of saliva on her lower lip. She thought her mother seemed bewildered, uncertain as to what to do next. Brother Beriah was holding up his thin hand (it looked as damp as ever) and trying to speak, with tears rolling down his cheeks.

"This poor sister is right," he said, brokenly. "Angel! Not Angela any more! Angel is her name, her blessed name!"

"Healed! Healed! Healed!" the sufferer continued to shout.

Miss Ella Meers, vigorously urged on by her group, got to her feet. She was very white, with a taut line about her lips, and her eyes snapped. "Let us see you *walk*, Sister!" she called out shrilly. "We hope you're healed, and we rejoice if you are, but we want to see with our eyes! Come on! Walk down the aisle!"

But her thin treble was drowned out in the chorus of praise, and the child saw her grandmother, redly flushed, breathing hard, take competent charge. She went, at her short-geared trot, to the organist, and an instant later the music of a hymn pealed forth, and the congregation, here one, there another, now a group, joined in until they were solidly singing:

"Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
Let the people praise the Lord!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Sing ye all with one accord! "

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Angie knelt where she stood, gently tugging at the woman beside her until she, likewise, dropped to her knees, and Brother Beriah went stiffly down beside them. Angie swayed, almost as if she were dizzy or faint, and leaned limply against the pulpit, keeping her eyes closed, her hands still clasped, although they slipped down from beneath her chin and hung flaccidly before her.

"Oh, look—" a woman near Edwina interrupted her singing to say to her friend—"she's overcome! She's swooning, Sister Angela—that *angel*!"

"It's—virtue has gone out of her!" her companion returned, choking with emotion, her chin quivering.

"Sing aloud and praise His name!

Sing His glory, tell the story—"

sang the congregation, and Mrs. Meeker, leaving the platform, came charging down among the singers.

"Brethren! Sisters! *De-urr* friends!" she begged. "Will you quietly pass out with the singing of this hymn, not even waiting for the benediction? We've had all the benediction we need, praise God! Will you pass the word along? Thank you, Brother! Thank you, Sister! Just to quietly pass out— My poor child, in her delicate state of health— Pass the word along—"

Miss Ella Meers tried once more. "All right, we'll go, but just let that woman come walking down the aisle without limping or hobbling, that's all we ask! Just let her—"

But she was drowned out with cries of "Shame!" "Unbeliever!" "Doubting Thomas!" and the swelling rapture and triumph of the hymn—

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“Sing aloud and praise His name!
Sing His glory, tell the story
Of His wondrous love to men,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
Let us spread abroad His fame!”

Chapter V

ANGIE stayed in bed for two days and remained in her room for a week, but about the middle of the period she was able to see the editor of the town paper for a few moments, and to give him the statement which was widely copied throughout that territory.

She said, very modestly and humbly, her lovely eyes dilating with feeling as she spoke, that she knew no more about it than her questioner did. She couldn't explain it, and she didn't want to try to explain it: she was just accepting it gratefully and devoutly, and trying, with the Lord's help, to regain the bodily strength which she seemed to have lost.

"Mrs. Beriah Turner, wife of our highly respected fellow-townsmen, 'Sister Angela' to her congregation and 'angel' to the hearts of many believers, is a very simple, modest, unassuming young lady. When interviewed at the old Turner home on East Main Street, long conceded to be one of the ornaments of our rapidly improving residence section, the fragile woman preacher gave the effect of extreme physical delicacy, but of this case it may well be said that the spirit indeed is willing if the flesh is weak."

There was a full column of it, and Mrs. Meeker bought six extra copies of that issue and cut them out neatly with Mrs. Mollie Bascom's shears. Mrs. Bascom, who had not been at church on the historic occasion, freely granted Miss Ella Meers that it was

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unfortunate that the woman healed of rheumatic lameness of years' standing had left town that night or early the following morning.

"I can see, Ellie, just how it looks to you, and some others, and then, too, I can understand that the poor thing'd want to put right out for her old home, like she said, and show herself healed to her own folks."

"Well, where is her old home? Who are her own folks?" Miss Meers demanded.

"Land, Ellie," her friend returned mildly, "what's the use of asking me? I never heard of the woman, never laid eyes on her that I know of. It's all a mystery to me, I'm free to say. But I can be glad for poor Beri'! Why, that man is walking on air!"

Edwina, overhearing that remark, was immensely thrilled. It seemed to her a far more remarkable achievement than walking on water, which had, she knew from certain modest brookside experiments, a carrying quality for leaves and twigs and even light sticks. She followed her stepfather about as closely as she dared, but decided presently, with deep disappointment, that he must practice his new accomplishment only at night, after she had gone to sleep.

Brother Beriah Turner, as well as his wife, consented to be interviewed, and gave as his earnest conviction the statement that their church in its mission of healing stood at the threshold of unlimited glory and service to mankind, not to mention the pride and publicity falling inevitably to Deerville. Mr. Turner, the paper reported, felt that the present edifice would soon be inadequate for the crowds which would throng to hear Sister Angela and beg for the laying on of her hands, and was already occupied with the project of a new

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lot and a building of truly magnificent proportions.

Mrs. Mollie Bascom said to Angie, to Mrs. Meeker, and to Miss Meers that she had never seen Beri' so "het up" over anything in all his born days; never seen him rushing around so, like a chicken with its head off. She was certainly glad to see the old fellow so happy and interested but she wondered if he wasn't overdoing it a little, for a man that was sent home to die only a year or so ago?

Edwina supposed it was God who had sent him home to die, and continued to watch him covertly and fascinatedly, and she was very much pleased if a little scared, to be intrusted with a message to him by Miss Meers. It was a newspaper clipping from a city daily, commenting upon the recent happening in Deerville, and was headed—"ELIJAH'S CHARIOT IN COMMISSION AGAIN!"—and went on to say, with heavy sarcasm, that the miraculous healing of the rheumatic cripple had been followed by an equally miraculous disappearance.

The thin, dark woman read it aloud in the kitchen with much relish and then directed the child to take it to her stepfather.

"Oh, now, Ellie, what's the use?" Mrs. Bascom protested mildly. "Show it to Angie or Mrs. Meeker if you want to, and let them—"

"Yes," sneered the caller, "likely he'd ever set eye on it if that pair got their hands on it! You run on now, like I told you, Edwina, and hand it to your stepfather."

"He's in the back parlor, figuring at his desk," sighed his sister. "Been darting all over town like a devil's darning needle, even if 'tis the hottest day we've had

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this year, and he's put out about something or other, a'ready. When he reads that, he'll just naturally rise up and hit the ceiling. Goldie, you'd better not—"

But Edwina, with no intention of being cheated again of one of Brother Beriah's performances, had sped down the hall at the last period. She softly turned the handle of the back parlor door and slipped noiselessly into the room without attracting his attention. She had the feeling that if she announced herself on the threshold she would get no further.

The shades were down against the torrid heat, and the big, high-ceilinged apartment was filled with a restful gloom as she went forward on tiptoe.

Brother Beriah was at his desk, as Mrs. Bascom had said, but he was not figuring on the new church which was to house the glorious ministry of his young wife. Edwina thought at first he was talking to himself, rolling out a preachment of some sort, and then she thought he must be talking in his sleep, because his eyes were closed and there was a dark flush mantling his face, and his breathing was labored and stertorous. Then she saw that he was not talking at all, but emitting strange and distressful groans, and that he had slumped down in his chair, spilling half out of it, and she dropped the clipping which was to have produced such a fine dramatic effect and ran screaming down the hall.

In a few days he could speak enough to make his needs understood. It was, of course, Mrs. Bascom who took brisk and capable care of him, fitting the exactions of his condition serenely into her daily routine. He would not have suffered Mrs. Meeker to come near him, and the faintest suggestion of any exertion

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on Angie's part brought anxious protest into the faded blue eyes whose gaze devoured her, and into his mumbling speech.

His sister, who developed an amazing talent for knowing what he was trying to say almost before he tried to say it, would say—"Never you mind, Angie! I'll get it!—Now don't you go to fretting yourself, Beri'! Your old sis' is going to do all the waiting and running, and you know she's tough! Angie's just going to set on a cushion and sew a fine seam and live upon strawberries, sugar and cream, like the girl in the old Mother Goose poetry!"

She let Edwina run trifling household errands for her, out of the patient's range of vision: she never let him feel that the child was serving him. She roused a delicious horror in the little girl by quoting a shocking jungle of her own childhood, wherein an aged granddam had besought a young trollop to fetch her specs, saying:

"You're young and spry!—
You can do it better'n I!"—

to which the graceless hussy had returned:

"Aw, go on! You're old and tough—
You can do it well enough!"

Edwina knew very well what that young woman should have expected God to do, but the story ended on the high note of unpunished impudence, and it was heartening to hear Mrs. Bascom's chuckle in that heavy household.

She was buoyantly optimistic with her brother. It was serious, sure enough, she admitted reasonably,

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but she didn't know as she'd ever heard of anybody's not getting round again after the *first* stroke, and then, with good, sensible care, there mightn't be another for years!

But his washed-out blue eyes would fill very slowly with tears which welled over onto his hollow cheeks and ran down into his mouth unless she was quick enough to wipe them away, and he mumbled something which Edwina, sitting silently on a hassock well out of his range, could not understand, but which Mrs. Bascom correctly interpreted to mean—if only he could last until—if only he could live long enough to see—

He was not deceived by the improvement of being promoted to a great padded armchair. He held long conferences with the doctor and his wife, consulting the dates on a gay advertising calendar on his wall which pictured a husky young man with his sleeves rolled back to display pugilist muscles expertly changing a tire while a smart girl friend looked admiringly on. These conferences made Angie nervous and petulant, so he presently gave up the habit, and only the slow, sly traveling of his feeble gaze to the brightly printed dates betrayed what was in his mind.

"If you could just *talk* to Beri' a little, Angie," Mrs. Bascom suggested mildly. "I can jabber my head off but that's nothing to him and never was. But you, now—"

"I can't think of anything to say!" her sister-in-law wailed, sick panic in her eyes. "I do try, Sister Mollie. But I can't! I *can't*!"

"There, there! Never mind, then," the other soothed. Angie seemed to be always rounding the corner on hysteria. "Well, then, I believe if you'd

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read out loud to him! What say we try it, anyway?"

So Angie, in the long, loose, diaphanous robes she wore constantly now, brought the worn old Turner family Bible and sat where her spouse could feast his sad eyes upon her, while she, keeping hers upon the page, was not obliged to look at him. His choice was a curious one: moving his head in slow negative against the prophets and the promises, he affirmed his desire—

"The Song of songs, which is Solomon's,"

Angie began in her velvet voice—

"Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine. . . . I have compared thee, O my love, to a company of horses in Pharaoh's chariots. . . . A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts. . . . Behold, thou art fair, my love; thou hast doves' eyes. Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant: also our bed is green. The beams of our house are cedar, and our rafters of fir."

"That stuff never seemed real respectable to me," Mrs. Bascom commented to Mrs. Meeker, carrying out her brother's hot water bag to be refilled, "but—land—I'd get in an organ grinder and a monkey, if I thought it'd amuse him and keep his poor old mind off his troubles!"

The warm days of summer had ceased abruptly with the beginning of Brother Beriah's illness, and a brief fall chilled into winter. It was too cold for Edwina to stay out of doors for very long at a time, so she spent hours every day, sitting in stealthy quiet upon her hassock, feasting her eyes and ears upon her

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mother as did the sick man. Sometimes she grew drowsy in the warm, close room, for Brother Beriah was always shivering and opposed fresh air, and the sensuous beauty of the words merged into lovely landscape dreams—

“I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. . . .
As the apple tree among the trees of the woods—”

The minister, the doctor, the lawyer, came often to see the patient, and Miss Ella Meers came, too, and other women of the church, but they were never admitted, and Mrs. Meeker and Edwina were treated with marked coldness at the services.

“Of course, the Meers crowd are running everything their own way,” the child heard her grandmother report to Angie. “Treat me like I was the dirt under their feet! But just let ’em wait till you’re in that pulpit again!”

Angie, however, took only the most languid interest in vague future conditions: the dreadful present and some dark and swiftly impending event engulfed her utterly, and at last the day came when she did not leave her room at all. Then Mrs. Mollie Bascom established her brother in the room which had been Angie’s before the marriage, with a couch for herself, and he demanded a wheeled chair so that he might be rolled in to see his wife a dozen times a day.

His sister winked bright tears out of her eyes while she cut out cookies or beat up fluffy omelets. “Beriah was always awful strong willed,” she sighed to her neighbor, “but seems like this is too much even for him! Just fading away, he is, under my hands! I’m

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going to send the young one over to you for the day, Ellie, if you don't mind."

Miss Meers agreed without enthusiasm, and Edwina looked forward to the visit with curiosity cut through with distrust, but went obediently and without protest when the day arrived.

"Good morning, Miss Meers!" she said as instructed by her grandmother. "Could I please stay with you for awhile? My mummer is sick, and Brother Beriah is worse." She looked eagerly round the strange house which seemed to her as dark and as sharp as the spinster herself. In the home presided over by Mrs. Mollie Bascom the rooms were ready for light and sun and air, bidding for them; Miss Ella Meers' bedroom and parlor and dining room seemed to turn inward upon themselves, dim, stiff, stuffy.

Noon dinner was a savorless meal with condensed milk out of a can. "I don't make much of a fuss over cooking, living alone, like I do," the hostess met her guest's imagined contrast, "but I guess you'll make out to stand it, for once. I guess you won't starve!"

Edwina ate sparingly and in silence, the cheap and badly seasoned food sticking in her throat, and sat primly in the parlor while Miss Meers did the dishes, and even then she was left long alone.

About three o'clock the woman came walking toward her with her quick, tapping steps. "I declare, I've got the fidgets, for some reason," she snapped. "I'm going to step round to the house and see how things are coming on. You stay here. I guess you won't set the house on fire, and nobody's likely to kidnap you. You can look at things, but don't pry and don't meddle!"

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Edwina did not intend to be disobedient, but she grew nervous and timid after a while, with the early winter dusk setting in, and she retrieved her wraps from Miss Meers' bed and let herself quietly out and ran home. Halfway there, she passed Miss Meers but she was on the opposite side of the street, her sharp eyes looking straight ahead, and did not see her.

She went in by way of the kitchen, hoping to find her friend, but the cheery place was empty and silent save for the contented purring of the kettle over a low fire, and she crept upstairs, listening first at her mother's door. Her mother was in tears again—noisy and painful tears, and there was the doctor's voice, and her grandmother's and a strange voice. It belonged to a woman, and was loud and cheerful and confident.

"Now, Mrs. Turner, just once more!" it urged strongly, and the child heard her mother cry out again as if in response to an order. Then she went softly down the hall, dim, for once, as Miss Meers', because the lights had not been lighted, and slipped into the room where her stepfather and his sister were, without being seen or heard.

"Now, now, Beri'," Mrs. Bascom was saying, "you mustn't take on so! You know it's bad for you! Land,—just be glad you're going to get your wish, after all!" There was a broken murmur, and then she said, resolutely,—“Look here! What say I read for a while?” She reached for the Bible. “Of course, I don't read as nice as Angie does, but any port in a storm, and she'll be reading to you again herself now, 'most any day!” She put on her glasses and began in her hearty and obvious voice:

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"Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bethel."

"Don't seem like that makes very good sense, does it?" she chuckled a little, and went on, picking out a verse here and there.

"Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? . . . Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? . . . Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is as strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave—"

There was a long scream from the room down the hall, cutting jaggedly through the quiet house, and Mrs. Bascom winced and said under her breath: "Just a little longer, Beri' "—and went doggedly on:

"Many waters cannot quench love . . . I am a wall, and my breasts like towers. . . . Make haste, my beloved—"

The scream came again, more terribly, and the sick man made a tortured sound. His sister bent over him, and the child heard him mumble an order, and saw the woman shake her head, but he reared up in his chair, lifting himself incredibly with his sound arm, and would have fallen out but for her quickness.

"All right!" she said pacifically. "All right, then,—we'll go! That was the last of it, I'll wager!"—and started wheeling him down the hall.

Edwina, unseen as they went past her, came softly behind them, and the big house, after the hideousness

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of the recent noise, seemed strangely and uncannily still. It seemed almost to be holding its breath, and the child thought there was a queer *swishing* noise like wings but decided it must be the wheels of the chair going swiftly along the carpet. Something, somehow, seemed to be racing with something else . . .

Suddenly there was a thin, wailing cry, and Mrs. Bascom said—"There, now! What'd I tell you?" She stood still. "Guess we'd better wait until—"

But Brother Beriah could wait no longer. Once again, in the fashion his doctor would have declared impossible, he raised himself, made a yearning gesture with his whole body, and pitched forward onto the floor.

Chapter VI

NO one noticed Edwina. After Mrs. Mollie Bascom had left the quiet figure of her brother on the floor and gone into Angie's room the child slipped downstairs and went into the kitchen. It was the one normal seeming place in all the strangeness of the house.

After a while—a very long time, it seemed, for twilight had set in—Mrs. Bascom came and lighted the light. “Oh, you're home, are you, Goldie? Well, you stay right here, like a good girl, won't you? We're—we're awful busy upstairs.” She drew a mug of water for herself at the sink and drank it thirstily, and passed the back of her hand across her forehead where her gray hair straggled in damp wisps. “Hungry, Goldie? Didn't eat much dinner, I'll warrant? There!” She gave her three large soft ginger cookies and poured a glass of creamy milk. “That'll keep you, I guess, till I get round to see about supper. Stay right here, won't you?”

Edwina nodded solemnly, her mouth full, and then she was left alone again, but the light and the food took away the unreality of things.

Presently a strange woman in a white dress came into the kitchen, and when she spoke the child knew it was her voice she had heard in her mother's room, saying: “Now, Mrs. Turner, just once more!” She

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stared at Edwina. "Why, hello, there! Thought you was off somewheres visiting!"

"I came home," said the little girl, sedately.

"Well, I see you did! Do you know where she keeps the tea?" She was inspecting the kettle and looking vaguely about her. She looked kind, Edwina thought, but very tired. "Well, I guess you kind of imagined there was something pretty exciting in this house to come home for!"

"Brother Beriah?"

"No, poor soul! Well, the poor old feeble old gentleman, I guess he'd been going on borrowed time. No! Guess what you've got upstairs in your mother's room, and you can go up pretty soon and see for yourself." She looked suddenly arch and merry.

The child shook her head. Her mother and her grandmother were there, of course, but there was no occasion for glad excitement in that.

"*A baby brother!*" Then, waiting for the initial wonder to pass, the nurse came close to her, her eyes wide. "And that's not all. No, siree, that's only half! *Two* baby brothers! Did you ever imagine anything like that in all your born days? *Twins!*"

"Where—did it come from?" she swallowed hard.

"Not 'it,'" the stranger laughed. "'Them!' Why, Dr. Bundy brought 'em! He brings 'most all the babies that come to this town. Of course, he gets them *somewhere*, but I've never heard him say just *where!*" Tired as she was, she twinkled at her dazed listener, and gulped down a few swallows of scalding hot tea. "Pretty weak! What my mother used to call—'Tea begrudged and water bewitched,' but I've got to rush right back. I guess you'd better stay here till your

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grandma comes down. Then, bime-by, I'll call you to come up and see 'em."

Mrs. Meeker came down in a few minutes and heartened herself with tea and bread and butter, and made gruel and carried it away on a tray. She hardly spoke to Edwina, and she seemed weary and depressed. The doctor went away, and then two strange men came driving up with a long enclosed wagon, and went upstairs and were gone a long time, and at last Mrs. Mollie Bascom came down and went steadily about the preparations for supper.

"Goldie," she said, "a lot has happened under this roof to-day; life and death have happened here, Goldie." She had come to a stage in the supper where she could pause and wait for things to cook, and she sat down and took the bewildered child on her lap. "You poor young one," she murmured, with the ghost of her old cheery chuckle, "you can't make head nor tail to it, can you? Well, now, I'll tell you. Brother Beriah, poor old Beri', is dead, and your mother's got two little new baby boys—cutest things I ever laid eyes on, both hale and hearty and just of a size! They're your little brothers, Goldie, your half-brothers, really, but you just call 'em brothers and you *feel* brothers about 'em! Poor old Beri', that was the cruelest part of it, his not seeing 'em. . . . I shall never forget to my dying day—" her eyes dilated darkly at her thoughts—"what I was reading to him that very minute—'*Make haste, my beloved*—' and he did, land knows. I wouldn't have believed he could haul himself up that way, paralyzed like he was, not if I'd seen it written in flaming letters on the sky!" She sighed, and winked away one of her infrequent

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tears. "It was a race, sure enough. Yes, sir, it was a race—and the Reaper won!" There was silence then, while she rocked gently, the comfortable squeak of her chair mingling with the cheerful sound of cooking food. "Well, maybe he did see 'em! I expect he knows, anyway, by this time? Leastwise, we'll hope he does, poor old Beri'!" She gave Edwina a quick squeeze, set her on her feet, and went briskly about her business.

There ensued, the second day following, a solemn affair called a funeral whose like the child had never seen before. The house smelled heavily and stickily of flowers, contending with the odors of Mrs. Bascom's constant and generous cooking, and people came and went in a lugubrious stream.

Brother Beriah was in a long, beautiful gray box. It was now quite clear to Edwina that God had up and struck him dead, instead of her mother, in spite of her grandmother's many doleful prophecies.

Her mother did not come downstairs at all, and Edwina understood that perfectly: the two new little creatures upstairs, warm and squirming and making inarticulate hungry noises, were infinitely more fascinating. Edwina herself would have greatly preferred staying with them, and Mrs. Bascom rather urged that she be allowed to do so, but Mrs. Meeker was very firm about a vague something called showing proper respect.

"Well, anyhow, don't let her *look*—" her friend had suggested. "Sometimes it makes a kind of horrible impression on a young one's mind—"

But the grandmother disagreed again, and lifted the child up and let her look into the coffin. She was

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so taken up with observing how much larger the missionary's nose was than she had ever realized, that she forgot to see if his hands were still damp, although that had been her firm intention. All the rest of his face seemed to have sunk into insignificance and the nose stood forth boldly, like a great promontory on a flat coast.

Miss Meers and a friend sat near by during the services, and Edwina heard the thin, dark woman whisper: "Well, it didn't take 'em long, did it?"

And the other woman said under her breath—"And now they're on cold turkey the rest of their lives! Poor Mollie Bascom!"

There was a good deal of preaching and some singing, and out of much that was confusing Edwina made certain of one fact: Brother Beriah, that good provider, was now in Heaven with Our Father which art, and knowing his attitude toward herself she concluded, regretfully, that it was doubtless just as well that her own father was not with them.

Next day, under the mulberry tree, she performed an impressive double ceremony and buried Brother Beriah beside his sainted wife on India's coral strand. Dysentery. She felt still the same grateful worship of him, for the three meals following his burial had proved conclusively that, though lost to sight, he was still providing. Then she went joyfully into the house and upstairs to adore the two red wailers. "I have—" she proudly announced to all callers—"two twin baby boy brothers!"

The nurse went away in a week, leaving the widow in her mother's charge and a complicated system of formulas and nursing bottles to Mrs. Mollie Bascom, and

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Angie continued to cry almost as much as her sons did.

"The shock!" murmured Mrs. Meeker in explanation. "The grief! All she's been through, frail as she is!"

"Yes," Mrs. Bascom agreed, thoughtfully, scalding two rubber nipples. "Yes, of course. *And* the fact that she's not crazy about being the mother of twin boys!"

"Well, Angie—young as she is, and always delicate—and in her mission—" she bridled, eying the other woman defensively.

"Why, it's natural enough," said Mrs. Bascom, reasonably. "I'm not holding it against her. But I believe the time has come for a good plain talk between the three of us, and I'm set on having it!" She marched up the stairs with her firm and determined tread and the grandmother followed her, staring, wheezing as she always did when she hurried.

Mrs. Bascom went into the big bedroom, carried a bottle to each crib, and changed a fretful wail to a contented sucking sound, and sat down in a rocker, her capable hands folded in her lap.

"I believe I may's well move those fellers in my room to-night," she began.

"Oh, *would* you?" their mother breathed, pearl white against her pillows. "If I could have a night without *hearing* them—"

"Well, now, you shall!" her sister-in-law assured her heartily. "Angie, if you're a mind to be sensible, you can have all your nights without hearing 'em.—My land, no!—I don't mean to drown 'em like a batch of kittens, child! I mean—give 'em to me!"

The missionary's widow dragged herself up on her

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elbow and two dabs of color stung on her cheek bones. "Do you *want* them?" she gasped incredulously.

"Angie!" her mother chided. "Mrs. Bascom, you're joking, I understand that perfectly, but I must say I think it's uncalled for!"

But Mrs. Bascom addressed herself to the fragile form in the big old-fashioned bed. "Angie, you're young, and you're pretty, and smart, and you've got a great way with you, for preaching, and I guess there's no telling how far you can go with it, now that the wolf isn't at the door any longer. You've *got* a little daughter, a sweet-pretty child and a nice child if ever there was one: now, do you want two great stramming boys growing up like Jack and the beanstalk?"

"No!" shuddered Angie. "No!" she moaned, turning her face to the wall, and bursting into weak tears. "No, no, *no!* I don't want to hear them another night! I don't want to see them another day!"

"Well, then!" said her sister-in-law, triumphantly.

"You are trading on my daughter's weakness," said Mrs. Meeker, angrily, "taking advantage of her shock and depression, when you know that a mother's heart—"

"Now, Mrs. Meeker," the other returned peaceably, "I expect it's just as hard for you to talk plain and simple and aboveboard, and say what you mean, straight out, as it would be for me to beat around the bush! You're sparring for time, of course. You're just as crazy about the idea as I am—or Angie is—but you're setting out to make a good bargain. Well, that's fair enough. I want to be fair, land knows! But when it comes to a mother's heart, why, you and I know Angie hasn't got any more mother's heart than you

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could balance on the point of a needle. Probably she's got some other things more important; likely she'll do more good in the world, when all's said and done, than some that's crazy to have a lap full of 'em. Me, now—well, Dave and I always wanted a boy, the worst way. If there was anything in the world he wanted more'n a boy, I don't know what it was—unless—*two* boys!" Her chuckle, even in the stress of this moment, was as spontaneous as ever. "I don't believe, Angie, that you'll want to stay on here in Deerville."

The pale widow shook her head violently.

"Well, that's where you show your good sense. Ella Meers, while I don't uphold her, the cantankerous way she acts, Ella swings a good deal of influence in the church. You'd find you had an awful hard row to hoe. And I couldn't help you, being, as poor old Beri' used to say—a good woman but not a godly one!" She laughed without rancor at the memory. "Well, then! Suppose you deed this house to the boys, and one of the good downtown pieces that brings in a good monthly income—"

Mrs. Meeker gave a little yelp of protest. "Angie! Don't you answer her! Don't you open your mouth, Angie Meeker! If you go to making any bargains, I'll have you declared insane! I never heard such—"

"Now, then, set down, Mrs. Meeker, and hold your horses," the sister-in-law said patiently. "Not a penny for me, myself. I've got my house, back in Altura, and my pension. But I'm bound to see that the boys don't suffer by this. We won't talk terms then, till we get the judge up here, and Henry Lukens and the other executor. Get the whole kit and boiling.

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Everything legal and regular. Enough to feed and clothe 'em right, and educate 'em well. After that, they can fend for themselves. And they will, too, I'll promise you, the way I'll raise 'em!" Her eyes sparkled in anticipation.

"In the midst of her grief and sorrow," wheezed Mrs. Meeker, "you come to her, a broken, crushed creature, almost out of her mind with her sufferings of body and soul, and you try to tear from her bosom—"

But Mrs. Beriah Turner sat up in bed, flinging out her white arms and shrieking with a hysteria of temper and terror. "Oh, hush, Mummer—*hush*. You always have to *overdo* everything! You spoil everything! I want to get out of this horrible house! I want to leave this hateful town! I want to get away from those awful *twins*! And you're fussing at her and insulting her—" her velvet voice grew thin and shrill—"till she'll get mad, and won't take them at all!"

Chapter VII

AT first, she was so racked by the parting with Mrs. Mollie Bascom and the twin baby brothers, Edwina gave no thought to the future. The tear-dimmed, sob-shaken present engulfed her utterly. When she was a trifle calmer, however, moderating her woe or at least its outward manifestations at her grandmother's sharp behest, she was dismally sure that the old, comfortably forgotten, now bitterly recalled days were back again—the hollow houses, the scanty fare, the dusty day coaches.

Within twenty-four hours, she knew that her forebodings were wrong. A section in a Pullman, the thrill of an upper berth, meals in the diner, a decent hotel with a room which seemed dazzlingly handsome, food, which if not as unfailingly delicious as that she had recently known, had the value of unfamiliarity and the charm of being ordered from a long list, and a mother no longer in tears.

Angie was pensive, her full white lids lowered over her liquid gaze for long periods, but she wept no more. Indeed, her whole delicate being seemed to radiate a sweet and thankful relief.

Mrs. Meeker was amiable. "We'll rest a while, and take it easy," she said, "while I look around, and you get your strength back!"

They were in a town, Edwina saw, larger and more imposing than Deerville, and they went to several dif-

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ferent churches in turn, the grandmother cautioning the child against talking to any of the women who might greet them after the service.

"Say 'how do you do' and what your name is, of course. Don't act dumb, Edwina. But I mean, don't start jabbering about—oh, about our affairs." She considered her sharply, weighing and balancing in her own mind.

"But can't I even tell about my twin baby boy brothers?" That had seemed the most priceless of all conversational openings.

"No. *No!* You needn't to mention about them at all."

"Why, Grammer?"

"Because I say no, that's why! People aren't interested in hearing a child's chatter. You mind me, now, Babe!"

But being forbidden to brag of her proud possessions kept them the more prominently in her thoughts, and she grieved because no letter came to her, as per promise, from Mrs. Mollie Bascom, and begged to be allowed to write to her good friend.

"Now, never you mind—" her grandmother was beginning crisply, but her mother interposed.

"Oh, yes, Mummer! Let her write a letter, if she wants to! What's the harm in her *writing?*" Angie was looking over her daughter's head, and Edwina didn't see that she trailed one white eyelid for an instant.

"Well, if you're a mind to bother with her—" Mrs. Meeker conceded, and the child was assisted with her laborious printing of three or four interrogations which looked singularly limp without their customary ques-

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tion marks. It gave them rather the effect of not expecting to be answered, which was, perhaps, prophetic, for the Meekers left the town and moved to a larger one a few days later.

They moved twice more before they considered themselves settled. Then, after several weeks at a small hotel, they took a sparsely furnished but comfortable little house in an unfashionable residence district and became regular attendants at a church with revivalistic tendencies.

It was not until then that they gave over evasions and went definitely to work to cleanse Edwina's mind of memories.

"Why, Babe," the grandmother would say impatiently, "we aren't *going* to see them again! Those babies belong to that Mrs. Bascom."

"But—" Edwina wailed—"I thought they were mine! I thought they belonged to us!"

"Now, don't be silly, and don't be a cry-baby!—Great, big girl like you! Of course they don't belong to us! If they did—wouldn't we have brought them with us? We brought you, didn't we?"

"But, Grammer, I thought—"

"Now, never mind what you thought! Grammer's busy, and she don't want to talk about it any more! You go and sit down there and learn your text, now, like a good young one!" Edwina had been placed in Sunday School with the strict injunction to tell nothing but her name.

She gave over her questioning, at last. Mrs. Meeker represented to her that it made her mother sad, and Angie called her attention—superfluously—to the fact that it made her grandmother cross, so the dead past

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began gradually to bury its dead, along with Brother Beriah and his sainted wife . . . India's coral—something or other . . . Dys-dys . . . and the Lord continued to provide raw provisions which the grandmother, with languid and infrequent help from her daughter, indifferently cooked and served.

There was a vacant lot next to them, and in the house beyond that there was a large, noisy, jubilant family of children. Edwina, sunning herself on the front or back porch, standing shyly on the sidewalk, looked at them and listened to them wistfully. Once one of the larger girls waved a comradely arm at her and shrilled:

"Hi! Com' *mawn* over!"

Edwina started on a run, hesitated, went ruinously back for permission.

"No!" Mrs. Meeker was emphatic. "I should say not! Don't you stir one step to play with those noisy, common young ones!—Yelling and screaming round the neighborhood all day Sunday like they were! I'm surprised you'd even ask, Edwina, brought up the way you've been! They are 'the children of this world,' and you've heard, often enough, what the Bible says about *them*! You—" she grew less irate, more suave, with what the child had come to associate with her church manner—"you are a lamb of God. Our one ewe lamb, and we want to keep you unspotted from the world!"

After service one sunny Sabbath day, a lean woman with the burning eyes of a zealot came up to Angie. "Excuse me," she began, "but aren't you the one that did that healing back in Deerville last year?"

Angie flushed and paled swiftly, casting an appealing

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look at her mother. "I—I can't talk about it—" she stammered.

Mrs. Meeker put a quick, protective arm about her. "Yes, she is," she answered. "It was my daughter that did that. But it was a very strange, very terrible experience in a way, and it seemed to take it out of her so . . . She was prostrated, daughter was, for weeks afterward."

"Oh, but—surely, she's going on with the work?" the woman demanded. "With a gift like that—a divine gift—"

"Well, you see—" Mrs. Meeker broke off, hesitated a moment, and then spoke brightly to her daughter. "Angie, dear, you take Edwina and walk on slow toward home, and I'll catch up with you." She remained silent until they had obeyed her and were out of earshot. Then she addressed herself earnestly to her questioner who had been joined by two other women, beginning to wheeze in her leashed excitement. "Yes, oh, yes! She's going on with it! It seems like that's all she lives for—the thought of her mission of healing. It's just that I try to hold her back, thinking of her health. You know how mothers are! But I know I mustn't be fearful, and I mustn't be selfish! If daughter belongs to the world, why—who am I? That's what I try to feel about it. I must loose her and let her go!"

The pastor came up to them. He was a pallid, middle-aged man with sad eyes, and the woman who had first spoken to Mrs. Meeker laid an eager hand on his arm.

"I was right, Dr. Peale!" she triumphed. "It *was* her! I'm just telling her mother, with a gift like that—a divine gift like she's got—"

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"And I was just explaining," Mrs. Meeker cut in, swiftly, "that it's only because Angie is so frail—*not* that I would lift a finger to keep her from her calling—and I shall never forget as long as I live how she nearly slipped away from me, that time there in Deer-ville! There was days and days when she just laid there, as white as the pillow she was laying on—Young as she is, her life has been shadowed, Dr. Pease. Yes. Yes—daughter's a little widow! A child wife and a girl widow—you've noticed our Babe, perhaps! Our little one ewe lamb, that we're trying to keep unspotted from the world. But about daughter's mission of healing—" Mrs. Meeker began to wheeze, and breathe with difficulty.

"Perhaps," the lackluster clergyman interrupted in his flat voice, "you'll let me come and see you some day soon, and we could talk it over. Our congregations haven't been what they should: there are too many counter attractions to the church, these days—the world, the flesh and the devil. It might be that a few mid-week healing meetings would revive interest. If you'll let me have your address—" He jotted it down on the back of a shabby envelop while the women purred with commendation.

"I'll try to prepare daughter!" Mrs. Meeker's face was redly flushed. "The spirit is willing if the flesh is weak! I'll gird up my own feelings, a mother's natural feelings. I must loose her and let her go! I know where my duty lies even though—" she gulped suddenly, turned away to hide her emotion, and hastened after her daughter and her granddaughter at her short-gearred trot.

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The children of this world continued to wave and call to Edwina, but she always met their advances by running in the house, sometimes shedding a few self-pitying tears, out of range of Mrs. Meeker's irate eye. One Sunday, however, she was left alone all day. Her mother and grandmother had gone with some of the women of the church to a revival meeting in a country district thirty miles away, leaving soon after breakfast, and expecting, they assured the child, to return before her bedtime. Food was left in readiness for her lunch and supper, and she might sit on the front steps or play on the back porch, quietly, with due regard for the Sabbath, and she was not to admit any stranger to the house.

Edwina felt the premonitions of sin stirring within her before her relatives were out of sight. The children of this world were playing riotously in front of their house and her house and in the vacant lot between, and before she went out of doors Edwina repaired to her own tiny room, got down on her sharp little knees beside her bed, and earnestly recited both "Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep," and The Lord's Prayer.

Then, with the feeling that she had buckled on her armor even though she knew it to be frail, she went quickly out of the front door and down the steps and marched over to join the infidels. They greeted her casually—" 'lo, kid! Whatchername? Com' *mawn'n* play! He's it!"—and accepted her unwonted and frightfully significant presence without excitement.

She played clumsily and ineptly with them all the forenoon, feeling no resentment at their candid criticisms of her slowness and ignorance, scarlet-cheeked

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and wild-eyed with the guilty thrill of it. Sometimes their mother came to a window or door and called—"Hey! Kids! Go easy on the noise! Pop's tryin' to sleep!"—"Say, listen, you kids, Pop's gettin' sore as a boil! Didn't I tell you he's tryin' to get a little rest?"—but with slight effect on the jubilation of her offspring, and at one o'clock she called them in to eat and they took the neophyte with them.

The long table was lavishly set forth with delicatessen food on paper plates, and there were paper napkins. The children of this world dragged up the six dining-room chairs first and then supplemented them with a high chair for the youngest, a kitchen chair and the piano stool. The father of the family, a six-foot, good-looking mechanic, freshly tubbed and shaved but rather heavy eyed, lounged in and took his place at the head, yawning and stretching luxuriously. He wore only an undershirt and trousers and his powerful throat rose from his shoulders like a column, strongly carved in bronze.

"You're a swell bunch, aren't you?" he inquired of his sons and daughters. "Sure take a lotta pains to let a feller sleep on a Sunday, don't you?" Then he stopped midway in a rending yawn to stare at the terrified Edwina. "Hi! Ag'!" he shouted toward the kitchen.

"'Lo, Mart'! You come up for air?" his wife's voice shrilled.

"Say, listen! How many kids we got?"

"Couldn't say for sure! Wait till the census man comes round—ask me another!" She kicked open the swinging door and came in with a platter of steaming sausages, and stared in her turn at the stranger.

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"Well, well! Look what spring has brought us! Who might you be?"

"Edwina Willow!" It came in a gasp. She could only conjecture what the children of this world, angered, might do to a representative of the children of light.

"Well, that's sure a mouthful!" commented the hostess amiably. "Pitch in and eat, Edwinawillow! Sundays, I don't crave hangin' over the stove all day, so we delicatess"! Kids, see that your comp'ny gets what she wants."

"Oh," said the father, in apparent relief, "so that's it! I was thinkin', maybe, Ag, you'd kinda oozed her in on your old man when he was feelin' hazy! Thought maybe she was one of your *own*!" He grinned and ducked swiftly as his wife aimed a cuff at him in passing.

"Fresh!" she said, coming back to muss and rumple his abundant dark hair with which he had evidently taken great pains. "Way you were last night, I could a' handed you hippo triplets without you battin' an eye!" She gave his head a cuddling hug against her shoulder and ran an observant eye up and down the table. "Frankie, what's the reason you're not eatin' your nice weiney?"

The little boy shook his head and a sister spoke for him. "I betcher he's sick, Mom! He wouldn't play nice all morning and he's just as grouchy!"

The mother advanced upon him and put a handsome, hard-worked hand on his forehead and demanded to see his tongue. She was a big, comely young woman, broad-hipped, deep-bosomed, high-colored. "Sick or just plain peevish, young feller?"

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The father looked on with interest. "You know, Ag', I sometimes think—"

"Yeah, but not often," his helpmeet cut in.

"—we let our kids stow away too much fancy stuff," he finished solemnly, helping himself to a slab of cheese.

"You do, huh? Well, you don't see any little white hearses in this block do you? You betcher neck you don't! Frankie, if you ain't hungry, you go lay down on the couch."

Edwina followed him with her gaze. He looked feverish and heavy. "I'm afraid," she pronounced regretfully, "that God is going to up and strike him dead!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated the head of the house, putting down his knife and fork.

"Oh, you will! You *will*!" Edwina vibrated with pity for him, for all of them. It seemed to her so inexpressibly tragic that they should have this easy and unworried foreknowledge of their doom: that they should blithely continue in sin. "Because you are the children of this world!" She could no longer partake of their sausage and cheese, their snails and doughnuts and pickles, when, like Sodom and Gomorrah, they were about to be destroyed. She slid from her chair and went in and sat by the sick boy, staying with him, in spite of the pleas of the brothers and sisters to "Com' *mawn* out'n play!"—until it was time for her to go home. She was animated not only by human sympathy, but a morbid curiosity to see the manner of his taking off.

She let herself into the empty house and guiltily made away with a portion of the food, and then, al-

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though it wanted an hour of her usual time, she undressed and went to bed, basely pretending sleep when her mother and grandmother returned.

For a week or more, taking her airings only in company with her relatives or on the back porch, not even looking toward the abode of gay and unrepentant wickedness, she waited in vain for her own retribution. Mrs. Meeker and Angie were out a great deal, so she had ample solitude for her unhappy meditations. Then, one warm afternoon, she fell asleep after her lunch of bread and milk for which she had felt scant appetite, and spent three hours in drugged and unrefreshing slumber. She got unsteadily to her feet, her head throbbing and hot, her vision blurred, her throat thick and stiff, and knew that her sin had found her out.

But it was not until she caught sight of herself in a mirror that she knew the worst. Her mother and grandmother came in to find her with a high temperature, babbling her confession. She told them, between sobs of hysteric terror, the whole dark tale of the desecrated Sabbath. She knew, now, that she would never see Our Father which art in Heaven; that she would soon join *my* father who *is* in hell. "Look!" she shrieked, pointing at the angry red blotches and the countless smaller red polka dots which covered her lean little body from head to heel—"Oh, Mummer! Grammer, look! I'm *spotted from the world!*"

Long after the doctor had come and gone again, and after a man had rattled up in a noisy car and tacked a placard on the outside of the house, beside the front door, telling the world, so that he who ran

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might read that herein lived—and doubtless died—a wicked and unregenerate creature struck down by God, Edwina heard the ceaseless stream of talking between Mrs. Meeker and Angie, flowing, flowing . . .

Once her mother's words came clearly—"Oh, Mummer, I don't care! It seems kind of cruel, poor—"

But her grandmother wheezed decisively: "Now, Angie, don't you be soft! It's the best thing could of happened and a lesson she won't forget to her dying day!"

Dying day! This day, she wondered, or to-morrow? She was thankful, at least, for one undeserved mercy: she would not have to meet Brother Beriah, nor feel the dampness of his hands. . . .

Days, weeks, months later—time was formless and vague in her many and cumulative miseries, once, while Mrs. Meeker was away and Angie taking a nap, the child slipped out of bed and staggered weakly to the front door, opened it, and clinging to the door-casing in her dizzy faintness, stared at the sign which described her infamy to the public. There had been wind and showers, and the placard was torn, but she was able to make it out. The first word she knew, of course—ME, but the second was beyond her. Naturally, since she had never come under its dark significance before. ASLES. What did the actual meaning matter—wicked—lost—abandoned? She, Edwina Willow, once a little lamb of God, a child of light, was now ASLES, spotted from the world.

Book Two

Chapter VIII

THE room in which Mrs. Dexter sat was richly and satisfyingly beautiful. The proportions were good, the furniture interesting and characterful, and the colors fused with the effect of a mellow autumn wood, with here and there a sudden high note, like a gold or scarlet leaf among the lower tones of fawns and russets and sober greens. But perhaps the thing which contributed most to the beauty of her living room and library was the portrait of her dead husband which hung above the wide and generous fireplace. It was a painting in oils, done with skill and imagination, but it was the subject which gave the thing its definite appeal.

Hart Dexter had been an arrestingly handsome man, big, fair, picturesque in an almost medieval fashion. He was wearing riding clothes in the picture, which contributed to the effect, but his wife had always realized his faculty for giving even conventional modern dress the feeling of costume. His expression was singularly alert and alive, not so much in a mental sense though there was no lack of cleverness in the finely shaped head and the large eyes, set well apart, but with a buoyant good nature and kindness, emanating, a thoughtful observer would say, from an abounding health and well-being. The jocund fellowship in his scrutiny followed a guest all over the big room, giving him welcome; it warmed him like a fire

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on the hearth or the sun coming in at the wide windows.

His widow never crossed the threshold without looking up at it, and if she stayed there she glanced up again and again. They were in curious contrast, for she was a thin, dark, eager woman, rather exceptionally plain in spite of the force and vehement charm of her personality and the exquisite taste with which she was dressed.

A maid came in to see if she would have her tea, and she told her, in a surprisingly smooth and beautiful voice, that she would wait fifteen minutes—she was hoping that Miss Nan might come. At that moment she looked out and saw a figure hurrying up the broad path between her perfect lawns. "I see Dr. Davidson coming, Huldah, so you may bring it now, after all, and perhaps Miss Nan will come later."

She sprang up and followed the slow-stepping Swede into the hall—Mrs. Dexter was an agile, quick-moving woman—and greeted the clergyman as soon as the front door was opened.

"Jim! This *is* nice! Just in time for tea—and you'll be glad of it, won't you? Your hands are icy! Come to the fire!"

He followed her in and held his long, well modeled fingers gratefully to the blaze. He was a spare man, slightly shabby in his clerical black, wiry, tense, with a certain rugged sweetness in his face. "Serves me right," he admitted, "rushing my old bones around in this sharp spring weather without overcoat or gloves. I shall croak like a raven to-morrow." He, too, looked up at the portrait of Mrs. Dexter's hus-

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band, regarded it for an instant in quizzical admiration, drew back a step, bowed courteously, and then looked at the widow with an almost boyish grin. "You know, Maud, it's a curious thing, but that picture of Hart has such a living quality, it so dominates the scene I feel obliged in common mannerliness to say—'Good afternoon' or 'Good evening' whenever I come into this room!"

"I know," she agreed. "It's amazing. It makes the portrait a really great piece of work, at least to those of us who knew him." Huldah had carried in a tray and placed it on a low table before her and she poured out a cup of tea for him at once. "There! Drink it down while it's piping hot, Jim."

"No, but it has the same effect with strangers, too," Dr. Davidson said. "Father McNamara remarked it the other evening, before you came down."

"Did he, really? That's interesting!" She urged a hot toasted muffin upon him.

Anything was interesting, he reflected, always had been, always would be, to Maud Dexter, which in any way touched upon her husband.

"Yes. He said"—he handed back his cup—"that's warming me through, Maud! May I have another? McNamara said: 'Glory be to God, but never a second husband could live in the house with that, I'm thinking!'"

She laughed with relish. "Isn't he delightful, Jim—Father McNamara? Such a gay, genial, childlike creature! A distinct contribution to our group. I hated to see Father Crespi go, but I believe I like this one better."

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He nodded, looking a little doubtful. "Crespi was a more scholarly man."

"Yes, but a rather tediously solemn one! I'm as grateful for gayety as for food and drink, Jim—and devoutly thankful that my boy is gay!—Give me your cup. Yes—you do need another! You were positively blue when you came in."

He relaxed in a beguiling chair opposite her, sagging a little in shoulders and chest. "A pretty satisfactory lad all 'round, shouldn't you say—young Arden?"

"Certainly I should say," she agreed. "The maudlin mother stuff; as he calls it. Yes, after his initial disobedience in being my ugly son instead of my beautiful daughter—" Her eyes went up to the painted figure in riding clothes for the fraction of the second—"he's been uncommonly satisfying, Jim." They were companionably silent for a long moment and then she gave him a searching scrutiny. "Take another muffin, Jim. I don't believe you've been eating lately. I shall have to come round and throw the fear of the Lord into that wretched housekeeper again. And what had you on your mind, to be dashing around without your overcoat?"

He was thawing luxuriously in the warmth. "You know, I believe I've been petrified for hours. Why, it's that abominable merry-go-round revival business on the South Side, Maud. We've lost—well, conservatively thirty people this month. People I'd have counted on, too."

"Oh, Jim, what do they matter? Idiots! You're much better off without them! I shouldn't worry about them," she urged impatiently.

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"No, of course you wouldn't, Maudie," he said with amiable irony, "but I have to! Worrying about the defection of thirty members of my rather meager congregation is distinctly my job."

"Well, talk to them then! Go after them! Tell them what idiots they are—tactfully, of course. Drag them back!" It seemed very simple in Mrs. Dexter's decisive utterance.

He shrugged. "What luck would you have calling in a flock of excited children to eat their good, nourishing cereal and whole wheat bread when a hurdy-gurdy gypsy was plying them with cakes and candies and ice-cream cones and queer, fizzy, stimulating drinks which went thrillingly to their heads?"

"I see!" She kindled to it. "That's very neatly put, Jim. I fancy that's the situation, exactly. Of course, if you wait long enough they'll get sick on it and of it—and come slinking back, but—"

"But if I wait long enough there won't be any church for them to slink back to!" he finished grimly. "You haven't any conception of how these—these Assyrians are coming down like wolves on the folds! I—our church—is only one of a dozen to feel it keenly. The same instinct—craving—whatever you like to call it—which motivates the age we live in. Over-stimulation, over—" he stopped and looked up as a girl came into the room. "Well, Nan!"

"My dear!" said Mrs. Dexter gladly. "I was going to wait tea for you, and then Dr. Davidson came in, congealed—but it's still hot, and I'll ring for more muffins."

"Please do!" She pulled off her coat and tugged at the tight little hat until it revealed a boyish bob,

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smoothed her hair with a brisk hand and dropped to the floor before the fire. "May I have seventeen or eighteen? No lunch. And a tank of tea, likewise? Whoof!" She exhaled an explosive breath. "Dr. Davidson, I'm looking for a little strictly professional information. I won't have to be a Public Health Nurse in Heaven, will I?"

He gave her the smile which lighted up his spare face so charmingly. "I believe the general idea is that we won't need any nursing, public or private, Nancy."

"Well, I'm greatly relieved to hear it. Otherwise—I was about to devote myself hastily to a life of sin!" She drank off a cup of tea and took a large bite of toasted muffin. She was a solidly built, clear-eyed, clean-skinned girl with a wide, humorous mouth and candid eyes, who wore her smartly cut sport clothes with a good deal of style, and she was as comfortably unselfconscious as a boy.

"What's the matter, Nan?" Mrs. Dexter was clearly fond of her in her cool and detached fashion. "Irregular triplets? Blood feud in Little Italy?"

Miss Hollister shook an emphatic head. "No! It's not the sinners I'm off to-day, but the saints!" She took another muffin. "Just dragged one nit-wit out of all-day, all-night, self-winding hysterics and broke up another seven-day fast and cheated a fine, sensible suicide, more fool me!"

"But, Nan—what *is* it?"

"Hallelujah Tabernacle! That's 'what is it!' Crying out loud, if I was Mayor of this city I'd turn the wrecking crew on it!" She held out her cup. "Me'n Oliver Twist, just like that!"

Mrs. Dexter leaned over to pour her tea and drop

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in a fresh slice of lemon. "Well, isn't that amazing? We were just talking about it when you came in."

"So's everybody else, talking about it! What I mean is, who's going to *do* something about it?"

"I am!" said a thin, dark boy, walking into the room. "What is it? 'Lo, Muz!—'do, Uncle Jim?—'lo, Nan!" He nipped a half muffin neatly out of the girl's hand and dropped to the floor beside her, sitting cross-legged. His likeness to his mother was so marked as to be almost ludicrous; it seemed beyond the range of probability and more like a clever make-up. "What, I ask you, is it?"

"It's that gospel merry-go-round, that salvation circus, the Hallelujah Tabernacle," Dr. Davidson informed him with some bitterness. "It seems its slimy trail is in Nan's district, too."

The lad grinned delightedly. "The perfect entrance! Because I'm going to do just that lil' thing!"

"What, Arden? Wait! I'm ringing for hot tea." His mother removed a cup from his reach.

"Going to do something about Hallelujah Tabernacle. Going to finish it. Out. Tear it down and blow it up. Yeah. The Boy Crusader—all the solemn oath stuff. I have promised me."

"More power to your elbow," said the clergyman, "but seriously—"

"Seriously is my middle name, Uncle Jim. Me'n the paper, I mean. The *Standard*. You see, it's like this. The *Union* has been rooting for 'em right along, which means that we are automatically on the other side, but we've been letting it ride until just now."

"Why just now, Ard'?" the girl beside him wanted to know.

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"Because I think—this is strictly under the hat, people—I think I've got the wood on the old girl—the high priestess—the sacred white cat. One they call 'Angel'! Listen, now, don't even repeat this to your pillows, because I'm nowhere near ready to spring it!" His bright, dark eyes ran from one to another, taking up pledges of secrecy. "I'm gumshoeing, now; uncovering the back tracks. That's why you've seen so little of me lately, Mrs. Dexter! Thought I was in the gutter, didn't you? And the weary months dragged by . . . then, a picture post card on Mother's Day. . . . Food, woman, food!" He smote his parent softly on the knee.

The maid came in with a pot of fresh tea and a plate of hot muffins and Arden watched her as she set them down and went heavily away. "What a moose!" he fretted. "What's the reason we can't ever have maids like in the movies and the magazines? Huh? I ask you?"

"Huldah *is* rather awful," his mother admitted, "but she's strong as an ox, Ardie, and while old Henry's been sick— But is the paper really going after this woman and her church?"

"You watch us! Not this woman; these women. There's 'Angel' herself, and she certainly looks the part—you have to hand it to her—and the old woman, 'Mother Meeker,' an awful old battle-ax, but the brains of the bunch, and then the girl—her granddaughter, and the other one's daughter, I *guess*. Anyhow, she sings, and they call her 'The Golden Girl.' Funny name—let's see—'Willow!' That's it. 'Willow!'"

"Pretty," said Nan, dispassionately. "What's she like?"

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"Haven't seen her yet. They keep her in the dark a good deal—only play her now and then, Added Attraction." He was wolfing down muffins like a healthy young animal.

"But you have seen the others, I take it?" Dr. Davidson asked.

"Coupla times, Uncle Jim. Went to give 'em the once over and see if we wanted to feature anything, but—with the *Union* playing 'em up, we decided to lay off."

"Well—what was it like?" Mrs. Dexter asked.

"Bunk, of course, of purest ray serene! But three thousand or so—they claim five thousand—simsps lapping it up and begging for more. Sickening. The 'Tabernacle's' a papier-mâché, movie effect, but—"

"But it isn't the building that's dangerous or significant," the minister observed, leaning forward to warm his hands again.

"You're darn' whistling, Uncle Jim," the boy agreed. "We could smash that pile of junk with golf clubs, but we can't smash 'Angel' that way." His keen, friendly young face grew steely. "We've got to take her to pieces before their eyes. Let 'em see the sawdust trickle out and the colors run, and all the rest of it. Going to shoot up the whole works. Pluck the Angel, and rub the gilding off 'The Golden Girl' and—and make the 'Willow' weep!"

Nan Hollister jumped up. "Late! I've got to lope all the way to the Settlement. Well, Ard', give me a ring and I'll come and help you vivisect him. 'By, Mrs. Dexter! 'By, Dr. Davidson! Thanks a lot for the tea!"

"Run you down in the fliv'," said Arden, scram-

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bling to his feet. "She's right out there—mcoing at the bars!"

"Wait!" Mrs. Dexter put out a detaining hand. "Nan, wouldn't you like to go to one of the services and spy out the land?"

"Adore it!"

"To-morrow night, then?"

"That's the big night," the boy contributed. "All the set pieces. You, Uncle Jim?"

"I'm afraid not, Arden. But I'd certainly like to get your reactions, Maud!"

"Well, then, Nan and Arden and I will go to-morrow night, and you and the other Wise Men will meet us here for supper at—what time, Ardie? They hold forth as late as that? Very well. We'll say eleven, and you won't mind if we're a little late." She was sparkling as she always did with a zest of a new idea, Davidson told himself. "I'll telephone Father McNamara and Rabbi Meyer." She said good-by to the boy and girl rather absently. "Will you stay for dinner, Jim? I wish you could. I'll send you home in the car. Yes—positively! It would be too silly to go out in the cold again, after toasting by the fire." She rang for Huldah and gave the order.

"Well—are those nice children going to make a match of it?" Dr. Davidson rose and stood resting one hand on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, Jim, I don't know. I hope so. At least, I *think* I hope so! Nan's a dear. And she's well born, and had everything when she was younger, and yet not a whimper, not a droop-at-the-corners at being left practically penniless. I do like her!" But her eyes went

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for a swift second to the portrait of Hart Dexter, dim now in the softly gathering dusk.

"Only," he shook his head at her, "that she's hardly pictorial enough for you! Maudie, you're a hopeless pagan."

"I know it," she admitted shamelessly. Huldah came to say the car would be round in five minutes. "You must take one of Arden's mufflers, and tuck the rug round you."

"You're most beautifully good to me," he said gently, looking into the fire.

"Well, some one has to be! You never are to yourself," she countered briskly. "Now, stop worrying about this Hallelujah business, Jim. If the paper's really out for blood, its days are numbered. And don't grieve over the back-sliding idiots! They're not worth one of your nice gray hairs. You *are* getting rather frosty, Jim! But all the same, I do wish there was something tangible I could do to help! I'd do anything: you know that, don't you?"

"Anything," he laughed stoutly enough but there was an interlining of wistfulness in it, "anything except coming and hearing me preach!"

There was the sound of the car in the driveway, and Mrs. Dexter rose, laughing with him. "I know! But you see—if I want a lecture, I go and hear a lecture, and if I want an essay, I read my *Atlantic*, and if I want to read the Bible—if I should want to read the Bible, why, I read the Bible! And you don't mind, do you, Jim? Good old Jim—of course, you don't!"

Dr. Davidson, tucking a gay young scarf of Arden's about his lean neck, said he did not mind, of course.

Chapter IX

THE clergyman was the first to arrive, the following evening, but the priest and the rabbi came in ten minutes later, and the three of them waited together before the fire and beneath the dominating painted presence of Hart Dexter for half an hour.

James Davidson compared the thick, old-fashioned watch which had been his father's with an interesting banjo clock on the wall. "Evidently, the merry-go-round is having a few extra revolutions this evening!"

The Jew, easily the most distinguished of the three, looking, as Mrs. Dexter said, like a prophet out of a frieze, seated himself tentatively three times before he was settled. "The most comfortable house in this city," he relaxed, contentedly. "Always I forget which is my favorite chair; always I must discover again. My dear Doctor Davidson—" he had a richness and color in his sonorous voice which was more than accent, and he seemed to change the crisp *c* into a more lingering *k*—"my *dear* Doktor, I think you are taking this foolish thing with too much seriousness. I have thought it a joke!"

"It is a joke, Rabbi, of course, a vulgar and grotesque joke but—"

"But the joke is on us?" Father McNamara wanted to know. He was a robust, ruddy person, all curves and rising inflections. Indeed, beside the fresh and bonnie good looks of the Romanist and the dark dis-

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tion of the Hebrew the minister looked a little faint and shabby, in his flesh as well as his clerical cloth.

"If I feel more strongly about it," he said, a little defensively, "it is because I—my church—has suffered more. And we are not alone in it. Every Protestant church in town has felt the sinister touch of Hallelujah Tabernacle. I am intensely gratified to know that one newspaper, at least, will have the courage of the convictions which all of them share, and take a definite stand against her—against them, for I understand there are three women at the head of it. Three generations—mother, daughter, granddaughter."

"The *Standard*?" Father McNamara asked. "The paper the Dexter boy is on?"

"The paper Mrs. Dexter owns," supplemented Davidson. "Her father owned and edited it in his lifetime. She inherited it, and it will belong to the boy, eventually. He is working his way up in it, learning it from every angle. He even sold papers on the corner in his grammar school days, and spent practically all his college vacations in the office or on assignments."

"Well, well! Clever, the lad?"

"Very keen, I think. Remarkably unspoiled, shouldn't you say, Rabbi, for a fatherless only son, of large means?"

Rabbi Meyer moved his great head in emphatic affirmation, but he was watching the priest who was standing squarely before the portrait, gazing up at it. After an instant, the Jew said: "But also is *Mrs.* Dexter most attractive, after a quite different fashion!"

Dr. Davidson shot him a quick look. He had always liked him, but his liking warmed suddenly at this evidence of his loyalty to their friend, his instant an-

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swer to the unspoken comment in the priest's mind.

"Yes, yes; yes, yes! Yes!" returned Father McNamara, ruminatively and then explosively, as was his fashion.

"My fancy has, in fact, no basis," the rabbi continued, "because it is straight American blood of the oldest, I understand, but she reminds me of a woman in an old Flemish painting—Alt Pinakothek—Munchen—if in the costume, the modeling of the face would be more marked—"

"Ah?" the priest nodded. That did not interest him especially. He turned to Davidson. "She is your parishioner?" And when the clergyman shook his head—"Not yours, then?" he smiled at the Jew. "Nobody's! Then, Glory be to God, we should be saving her, bechune the three of us!"

There was—wasn't there?—James Davidson told himself and asked himself, something of the stage Irishman about him? The brogue shaded deliberately, didn't it? He seemed, at any rate, a little obvious before the Eastern subtlety of the other. "I think I hear them," he said.

Mrs. Dexter came quickly into the room with her son and the visiting nurse behind her. They had taken off their wraps in the hall, and the women wore dark dinner dresses, and there was about them all the stimulated excitement of people who had come from an astonishing play.

"Wait!" said Mrs. Dexter, after greeting them. "We won't even begin to talk until they've brought in supper!" She gave her quick, low-toned orders while Huldah and another maid rolled in a tea wagon, pulled up her low table, brought a steaming chafing dish and

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a chattering percolator, plates of sandwiches and little cakes. "There—that will do!" she told them. "You needn't wait. Mr. Arden and Miss Nan will help me." When the servants had closed a distant door behind them she began.

"Rabbi, Father McNamara—Jim—I've seen the most amazing, incredible performance of my life!"

"Performance is right," said Nan Hollister, putting solidly dependable trays on the knees of the clerics.

"She is without doubt the cleverest creature I've ever looked at—or listened to!—'Angel' herself, I mean. Arden says, and I've no doubt he is right, that the mother—*her* mother—is the brains, the business head of it all, but she could do nothing without the daughter. To begin with, she's the most exquisite, ethereal thing imaginable. She's—I don't know! Like something seen under water. No—that's not it. She—"

"Remember once when we played 'adjectives'?" said Nan. "We pretended we could have only one adjective for each person, and we chose and rechose and rejected and discarded till—well, I've made my choice for 'Angel.' It's—*sheer*."

"Sheer nerve? Sheer bunk? Sheer—" the boy derided.

"No, don't spoil it. Just—*sheer*," the girl insisted.

Mrs. Dexter thought a moment, her eyes narrowed. "I believe that's very good, Nan. I don't think I could find a better one—if I could have but one. I like translucent, too. . . ." She was deftly busy with the details of the little meal, but addressed herself to the men. "She is the palest possible blonde—silvery, rather than golden, and her eyes are very large, very light, very brilliant. I'm not sure she doesn't put something

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in them. She gives the effect of the most appealing physical fragility; it's almost pathetic."

"And I'll bet she can juggle pianos," her son supplemented. "Here—I'll take the sandwiches! Let Nan pass the spilly stuff."

Father McNamara received his plate from the visiting nurse with enthusiasm. "And what had she to say?"

"Oh, what she says is the veriest piffle, of course. The simplest, most obvious, rubber-stamp stuff. My Huldah could write the sermon without the slightest strain on her mentality. But it's the dazzling, arresting beauty of the woman, and her strange, velvety voice which reaches to the furthest corner of that great building."

"The Tabernacle itself, it is impressive?" the rabbi asked.

"No—atrocious! Makes one think of a gigantic, ornate bird cage! The whole effect is theatrical, the whole service stage-managed. The old woman—'Mother Meeker'—opens the meeting, makes the announcements, gives out the hymns, offers a tawdry prayer in her dreadful, wheezing voice, and then Armitage sings—effectively, of course, and—"

"Armitage is singing there?" Davidson was surprised.

"Clyde B. Armitage, no less! Yes; he is one of their best drawing cards, I fancy. Another proof of their prosperity, for he's very high-priced."

"I know," the clergyman made a faint grimace. "He went beyond our reach two years ago."

"Only then, after the audience is properly mellowed, does 'Angel' herself appear. She makes an entrance

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by coming down a long balcony with a spotlight following her, bathing her in silvery radiance, lighting up her shimmering, silvery white robes—”

“‘Glistening,’ perhaps?” Dr. Davidson offered. “I’ve always liked ‘glistening.’”

“That’s perfect, Jim! And the mother waiting for her like a showman, like a ring-master. A frightful little person, stubby, thick, who trots and wheezes. Doesn’t she, children? ‘Mother Meeker!’”

“Day by day, in every way, she’s getting meeker and meeker,” Nan agreed, putting three lumps of sugar in the priest’s cup.

“The terrible meeker!” Arden improved on it. “Getting ready to inherit the real estate!”

“I have a theory,” said Mrs. Dexter, thoughtfully, “that they are afraid of each other. I think the old woman—she isn’t really old, though—coerces Angel, and cracks the whip over her, and yet is in mortal terror as to what she may do—or fail to do.”

Her son nodded. “That’s the way I dope it out, too. And don’t forget the signs! Big, gaudy signs over the pulpit and along the walls, sob stuff about their angel and one—‘Not Even Standing Room for the Devil in Hallelujah Tabernacle!’”

“Oh, but the best was—‘Satan Took Me for a Joy Ride but Praise God I Walked Home!’” said Nan. “And old ‘Hallelujah Mary’ herself!”

“Yeah—the most awful old battle-ax! They dug her out of the county jail and the gutter and way stations and saved her, and now she swarms up on the platform and gives a testimony that knocks ’em for a loop!” Arden was urging sandwiches on the guests and helping himself absently. “She’ll be fat copy!”

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"But the people—the congregation?" Rabbi Meyer asked.

"In the main," Mrs. Dexter replied, "morons. Positively. Oh, they have wits enough to feed and clothe themselves and keep a job of sorts, no doubt, but mentally they ceased to function when they came to Long Division. They are the physically unfit; the financially down and out; the submerged; people to whom this world has given nothing, and who are therefore good prospects, as the bright young salesmen say, for selling corner lots in the world to come. The thing that made me furious was to see the poor things dropping their quarters and halves and even dollars into the contribution plates."

"She's the queen of the gold diggers," said Nan.

"Save for a few frank sight-seeing parties like ourselves, they were all off the same bolt. Father McNamara, will you have a little more of the crab?"

"I will that," he acceded heartily. "So that's how she's building her big golden bird cages?"

"And there are possibly people of wealth who give substantial sums," Rabbi Meyer suggested.

"I can't imagine it," Mrs. Dexter shook her head.

"Can't you?" Dr. Davidson said dryly. "Well, you know Mrs. Eastwood?"

"Mrs. John Walker Eastwood? Of course. But you don't mean—"

"She has been a member of my church since she was seventeen, and she has gone over utterly to Hallelujah Tabernacle."

"Jim! *Isabel Eastwood?*"

"Yes. I went to see her, but it was a waste of time. She admitted to me—no, that's not the word—she an-

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nounced with proud humility that she had been allowed to give twelve thousand dollars toward the Hallelujah organ. It is to be her sacred privilege to share her fortune with 'Angel' and the Tabernacle."

Mrs. Dexter looked utterly aghast. "What was it? The death of her daughter? Of course! She was dazed and befuddled with grief, and she went to Hallelujah Tabernacle just as other women go to mediums! Well, I shall go to see her to-morrow!"

"You won't accomplish anything," Davidson assured her.

"Perhaps not. Probably not. But I must at least try—just as I would throw her a life-preserver if I saw her struggling in the water."

"But she's not struggling!" Father McNamara chuckled. "Floating on her back, she is, gazing, blissful, at the sky!"

Nan Hollister sat down on a low stool beside her hostess now, her duties over, and addressed herself to her own supper with unashamed young zest. "Well, I don't think that's half as tragic, Mrs. Dexter, as the nit-wits I've been dragging through Angel-itis! This Mrs. Eastwood has plenty of money; she won't suffer. But my poor morons give away their dinners and their shoes! Honestly, they do! I took care of a woman to-day who's been going without lunch for weeks and weeks, so she could put the twenty-five or thirty cents in the Glory-Fund! That's the stuff," said the visiting nurse, helping herself lavishly to Crab Louie, "that makes me thirst for her gore!"

"You must all go," said Mrs. Dexter, looking at the priest, the rabbi, and the clergyman. "The Three

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Wise Men must stop, look, and listen, and tell us their conclusions."

Dr. Davidson looked doubtful. "I greatly dislike the seeming encouragement—"

"Come, now, let's be going together, the three of us!" Father McNamara kindled to the idea.

"Gee, I wish you would," young Arden urged, dropping to the floor beside Nan. "I want to get all the ammunition I can before I unlimber the big guns."

"She'd want to drag us up on the platform and make us figure in her publicity," Dr. Davidson objected.

"Not necessarily, Jim," Mrs. Dexter answered him. "Just slip in quietly, separately, and give us your impressions. It will be of genuine service, if the *Standard* is committed to this exposure."

"Exposure?" Rabbi Meyer leaned forward in his favorite chair. "That is a serious word."

"I know it," the boy nodded. He looked swiftly round at the faces of the three men, ruddy in the fire-light. "This is absolutely confidential, please. We have three lines of attack. First, we're digging up the ancient history, and some of it is pretty rank! Second, we'll undertake to prove that her 'cures' are faked. And third—we're going to pull off the angel's pure white wings."

"Well, now, God save us kindly!" the priest ejaculated, startled. "D'you mean the whole of that, my lad?"

"I do, sir! Among others—Armitage, the tenor soloist of the Tabernacle. Exceeding peace has made Mrs. Ben Adam bold. She's been careless, and there are rumors of friction between her and her mother."

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"That's how you'll get 'em," Nan Hollister contributed. "Like a scrapping football team!"

It was still for an instant in the beautiful room, beneath the gay and genial gaze of Hart Dexter. Every face was grave.

"I earnestly believe that the *Standard* will be doing a great service to the community," said the clergyman. "And yet"—he hesitated—"it's a frightful responsibility, Arden, tearing down even a cardboard cathedral, if souls have found solace there. My church has suffered from it, and I have protested bitterly, but at times I have asked myself—'If you cannot give them food for their hunger, dare you complain when they go where they are fed and satisfied?'" His eyes were sternly challenging.

"Jim! Don't be absurd!" His old friend protested briskly. "It isn't food—solid nourishment—they want. As you said yourself—it's candy and ice-cream cones and sizzling drinks that go to their heads—"

"All-day suckers," Father McNamara contributed with a chuckle.

"It *is* a service and a duty," Mrs. Dexter went on, "and I'm proud of my paper. It's as tangible a piece of civic activity as cleaning up a slum." There was silence again. "What I should like above all else," she went on, more lightly, "would be to listen in on those two women when they're alone, that lovely, ethereal creature—what was your word, Nan?"

"Sheer."

"*Sheer!* That's perfect. And that trotting, wheezing old ring-master! What do you suppose they say to each other when the spotlight is turned off? I'm

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convinced that they fall upon each other like fish-wives."

"I daresay," Dr. Davidson agreed. "But what about the daughter—Angela's daughter? The young girl? You haven't mentioned her."

"Haven't we? She came in at the end and sang—a plaintive little voice, rather sweet. She was all in gold—they call her 'The Golden Girl,' You know. A most lovely young thing. I found her very touching, some way. Nothing of the ethereal about her; just a big, beautiful child with a singular purity of expression."

"*Purity?*" her son scoffed. "In that bunch?"

His mother shook her head. "Oh, I daresay she's off the same piece, but I do insist that she has at least the look of utter innocence."

"Not to me," said Arden with emphasis, holding out an emptied plate to Nan. "With that flying fish of a mother? With that old hippo of a grandmother?"

The visiting nurse scraped the last of the crab from the chafing dish for him. "Arden, do you think she's so frightfully beautiful?"

"Yeah." He reached for the last sandwich. "I think she's a gorgeous eyeful. But I don't get the dewy innocence Muz thinks she registers. Remember the crack we saw on that movie caption the other night—'Well, her mother's no good, and the apple never falls very far from the tree!' But I'll freely admit she's easy to look at!"

James Davidson, listening, smiled faintly to himself. Did Nan realize, he wondered, in how great a measure the boy had inherited his mother's pagan worship of beauty?

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"Yeah, easy to look at," Arden repeated. He sat staring into the fire while a charred stick fell to pieces with a little shower of sparks. "Golden hair—golden skin—golden eyes, by gad! But—" he addressed himself to his food—"the apple never falls very far from the tree."

Chapter X

A CLOSED car waited at the side entrance of the Hallelujah Tabernacle for the evangelists. It was a machine of moderate price, modest in color, with an unobtrusive "H. T." in place of their personal initials. It was driven by a pallid young man who sang in the choir and had embraced the faith, and he left the driver's seat and got the door open with clumsy haste when he saw them coming.

Mother Meeker wore the regulation garb of the Tabernacle Worker—a long gray cape over a severe white dress very like a nurse's uniform, with a small, close gray hat which resembled an old-fashioned bonnet, but her daughter and granddaughter were more pictorial. Angela's shimmering robe was covered by a voluminous wrap in a soft, silvery stuff, and the girl's cloak, in a shining metallic material, was gold colored.

The eyes of the driver, regarding them all with worshipful devotion, became humid when they rested on her.

"Willow, dear," said the older woman, "you get in front with Harold." She climbed into the car rather stiffly, following her daughter's slim ankles.

The golden girl hesitated. "I did want to ride with Mother to-night. There are some things I want to ask her, and I have hardly seen her for weeks and weeks."

"Grammer *asked* you to get in front with Harold,"

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said Mother Meeker in a grieved, patient voice. "Your mother and I have important matters to discuss. Yours must wait, Willow."

Willow walked submissively round the car and seated herself in front, and the youth sprang in beside her so quickly that he was discovered to be sitting heavily upon her wrap. He drew back with a smothered apology, lifted it ceremoniously in both hands, and laid it across her lap, his fingers lingering. "I hope I didn't crush it," he murmured abjectly.

"It doesn't matter," the girl said gently.

He slipped into gear with a nervous haste which was noisily evident and the car had begun to move when there was a call and the sound of hurrying feet. A Tabernacle Worker ran up to them and held a bouquet of lilies of the valley in her outstretched hands.

"—y' flowers!" she gasped, addressing Angela. She was a drab, bloodless-looking creature with dark, protruding eyes like a Japanese pug's and a wisp of indefinite hair strained away from her face.

"Oh, Sister Mercer, I'm sorry you troubled," said the evangelist in her velvet voice. "They are lovely, and I treasure the sweet and loyal thought behind them, and I didn't mean to forget them, but I have so many flowers. . . . Won't you keep them?"

"*Me?*" One arm was still outstretched, tendering the bouquet, but the other hand went to her flat chest in a gesture of incredulous interrogation. Her hands were sallow, almost snuff colored, with big purple veins on the backs and the scrupulously clean finger-nails looked sharply white in contrast.

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"Yes, dear Sister Mercer! It makes me so happy to share them with you." Angela gave her a smile of dazzling sweetness. "I want you to have my lilies." She made it so personal a gift that the exquisite blossoms seemed essentially hers and the lovely result of her efforts: it was as if she had planted and watered them and plucked them with her own white and fragile hands.

"*Oh . . .*" the woman gulped, stepping back, burying her nose in the flowers so that only her hideous, out-popping eyes were visible, fixed in adoration on Angela's face.

"*Good-night!*" said Angela, liquidly. She made a benediction of it.

The car got under way again, and this time, calmed of the flutter of embarrassment which always overcome him at his first contact with the girl, Harold shifted his gears very sweetly.

"Willow, dear, are you warm enough?" tenderly, her mother wanted to know.

"Oh, yes, Mother dear!" said the girl, gratefully, and after an instant she added: "Oh, Mother, how she *worships* you!"

"Sister Mercer? A dear, faithful soul! An ardent laborer in His vineyard." Angela spoke with warm sweetness, and then gave her attention to her mother who began to talk to her in a wheezing undertone.

The driver, keeping his eyes rigidly ahead, spoke to Willow without looking at her. "Everybody worships your mother. Angel! That's what she is to us. When I think how empty my life used to be—empty of holiness, that is, and filled with sin—"

The girl turned to look reflectively at his thin and

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austere young face. "Oh, Harold, I can't think you were ever very wicked," she comforted him.

"But I was! I was a forsaken sinner!" he urged, proud of his iniquity. "Dancing, card-playing, slot-machines, pool rooms—all the lures of Satan! By day and by night, my steps took hold on hell!"

"And Mother saved you, didn't she, Harold?" He had told her so a dozen times, but she could never tire of that tale.

"Yes, praise be to my Savior who died on the cross for me, He led me to Hallelujah Tabernacle and the sound of that angel voice! Satan fought hard to hold me. Evil companions made fun of my first feeble steps in the paths of righteousness, but she held down her white hand to me, and I clung to it, and clambered up, up, out of the mire!" His voice rose and quivered.

"Harold," said his listener, earnestly, "you speak so beautifully! You must come to the Children of Light meeting to-morrow afternoon and talk to my little ones."

"Oh, no! No! I *couldn't!*" Panic overcame him. "I can't speak in public. My throat closes and chokes me, my tongue cleaves to the roof of my mouth! It's only to you, just to you I can speak out my heart!" Still he did not turn his head, but she could see dark, painful color suffusing his face, even by the faint illumination in which they sat. "You are so understanding—so heavenly good—and kind— It—it's not only your mother I—people—worship! It's—it's *you*, too!" He brought out the final words with difficulty, in a smothered, choking voice.

The girl gave a little laugh which was utterly without self-consciousness but softly shocked. "Harold, you

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mustn't say things like that? Mother's everything!—and I'm—not *anything*, beside her!"

"Yes, you are," he said stubbornly, very low, "to me, you are, and I know others—" He stopped at the sound of the evangelist's voice.

"Harold!"

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Wait, please! I think we just passed Mr. Armistage!"

Mother Meeker said sharply that it was late, and they had several matters to attend to when they got home, but her daughter answered gently that it would make a difference of only a few minutes.

A tall figure came abreast of them presently and was swinging past when Angela called out: "Clyde! Is that you, Clyde?"

He halted, snatched off his hat, and stepped back to them. "Angel!" he greeted her in his rich singer's voice. "Mother Meeker—Willow—Harold!" He stood with his hat in his hand, bending his handsome head in turn to each of them.

"We'll drive you home, Clyde," said Angela.

"No! Please don't think of it! I don't mind the walk, and I won't have it on my conscience that I've taken you out of your way, after that exhausting service!" He stepped back from the car again.

"Well, I'm sure that's very nice and considerate," Mother Meeker approved. "We are all pretty much worn out, I can tell you!"

"Don't be foolish," her daughter chided the tenor softly. "It won't make a difference of ten minutes, Clyde, and the ride will refresh me!" She leaned past her mother and opened the door. "Come!"

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"If it really will—" he got in with alacrity.

"Move over, Mother dear," said Angela. "I'll sit between you, because I'm the smallest."

"The smallest, but the greatest!" the singer pronounced mellowly, settling himself beside her.

"You sang divinely to-night, Clyde," she told him. "I have never heard you in more wonderful voice."

"If that is true—and it is true for I felt it myself—it is because you inspired me. You have never preached a more powerful, a more thrilling sermon." He spoke very softly, but the clarity of his enunciation carried it to the front seat.

"Mr. Armitage worships Mother, too," Willow whispered, and Harold nodded in assent.

Mother Meeker spoke briskly. "And how is your wife these days, Mr. Armitage?"

There was withdrawal in his tone. "Thank you; she's quite well."

"Well, that's nice. I'm certainly glad to hear it," the older woman wheezed cordially. "And your children are all well, too, I hope?"

"Thank you, yes."

"That's fine. Four, aren't there? Two of each?"

"Three," he said coldly.

"Two boys and a girl?"

"No—two girls."

"Oh—and one boy?"

"Naturally."

The singer's voice, which was like old wine when he spoke to Angela, was ice water when he answered her mother, but Mrs. Meeker continued to discourse chat-tily of Tabernacle matters until they reached the rather remote neighborhood in which he lived, and drew up

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before a small, shabby bungalow. It was a whitely moonlit night, and a battered baby buggy was sharply visible on the porch, and a broken scooter on the sere and frowzy lawn.

"Dear, cozy little home," chirped Mother Meeker, "and 'a light in the window for thee!' Did you ever sing that, Mr. Armitage? A worldly song, of course, but simple and sweet!"

Mr. Armitage, alighting from the limousine and carefully closing the door after himself, said that he had never had the pleasure of singing it. He said good night to them all very briefly and went up the path, and as he passed the scooter he gave it a kick which sent it end over end.

There was no further conversation in the tonneau as they turned about and drove rapidly, but with due and careful regard for regulations, across town to the pretty and prosperous looking house which some of the workers fondly called The Home Temple. Harold was given his morning orders and gently dismissed, and Willow followed her mother and grandmother into the house and upstairs.

At the threshold of her own room Angela paused. "Mother dear, I will let our talk go until the morning. I find I am more tired than I realized. *Good-night!* And Good-night to you, my precious babe!" She took the girl's face between her hands and kissed her delicately upon the forehead.

"Oh, Mother dearest," said Willow raptly, "I won't keep you a moment, because I know how weary you are, and how you belong to the church, not just to me, but oh, I worship you, too, Mother, and I never see you, it seems, or have you to myself for a moment!"

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She flung her arms about her and gathered her into a breath-taking hug.

"Darling! *Please!*" Angelina disengaged herself with a tender, indulgent little laugh. "My Golden Girl mustn't forget that she belongs to the Lord's work, too! We haven't time to play together as mothers and little girls do who are in the world, but we have a holier happiness, precious! And perhaps this summer, if everything is going smoothly at the Tabernacle, you and I can run away together—just we two—to the shore or to the mountains for three or four days! Would you like that, Babe?"

"*Mother!*" She had no further words. She stood staring at her, star-eyed, the shining golden wrap slipped off her shoulders.

"And now you must run to bed, my lamb, and let Mother rest for the strain of to-morrow!"

Willow kissed her and went down the hall, for her room was at the further end of the house, beside her grandmother's, but she heard Mother Meeker say firmly that she was coming in for that talk, just the same, and heard her shut the door of Angela's bedroom sharply behind her.

The girl, snapping on the gold-shaded lights and illuminating her richly golden room, felt at once sad and rebellious. Her mother was cruelly tired; there were violet shadows under her glorious eyes and her slim shoulders sagged under their burdens of other people's sorrows and sins; she ought to be allowed to go to her narrow bed with its silver canopy at once. Grandmother was the best and most earnest person in the world, salt of the earth, the workers called her, with such a genius for business and organization, but she

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was so strong and tireless herself she forgot the fragility of her daughter. Willow found herself so nearly angry at her that she knelt beside her bed, even before she took off her beautiful Tabernacle clothes and prayed earnestly to be cleansed of the sins of criticism and selfishness, and to love, honor, and admire her dear, good grandmother as she should.

But she found herself, with her forehead resting against the silken bedspread, disgracefully drowsy, and the prayer slipped away from her restraining hold and a series of pictures came in its place . . . her angel mother in her gleaming robes swaying that great concourse of people . . . Harold, his sallow face rigidly forward, telling her kind, ridiculous things . . . Mrs. Mercer, her sad pug's eyes adoring the evangelist over the lilies of the valley . . . Mr. Armitage kicking the scooter across the frowzy lawn . . . the three strange people in the congregation who had sat well down in front and watched her mother and her grandmother with such odd, quizzical expressions—a plain, middle-aged woman in a rich, dark dress, and a nice-looking girl with a friendly face, and a young man, a boy, really, who must have been the woman's son because he was so exactly like her in masculine mold, with bright, tired dark eyes . . . she managed to collect herself for a very tiny prayer for them . . . that they might—in spite of the hard worldliness which they wore like highly polished armor—come to kneel at Jesus' feet . . . led by that silver star, her angel mother. . . .

Chapter XI

MISS EDNA EATON, who had been her governess and was now her companion, came to wake Willow Meeker every morning at six-thirty. She was an exceptionally plain woman, colorless, with indefinite features, and she frequently stood for a long moment looking down on the girl's young golden beauty before she spoke to her.

Willow always sprang out of bed obediently and instantly, not daring to trust herself to the luxury of delicious delay, for sleep held her with heavy hands. She knelt at once and prayed, automatically at first and then, as her brain cleared of drowsiness, with earnestness and fervor. She thanked the Giver of all Good from a full heart for all the bounties bestowed upon her, for her health and strength and for such small ability as she had for work among the children and for her singing; for the growth and prosperity of Hallelujah Tabernacle, and for the continued health and vigor of that good woman, her grandmother, for all faithful souls like Harold and Mrs. Mercer, putting their shoulders sturdily to the wheel, thankful to serve in any capacity, for "Hallelujah Mary," saved from the depths of hell to bear fervent witness to the glory of God by His Angel, for kind Mr. Armitage, sharing the magic of his voice with the Tabernacle, for Mrs. Eastwood, giving generously of her great wealth, but most of all, over all, for the miracle of her mother!

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When Willow thought of her mother it was with an uprush of love and tenderness and reverence which almost overcame her. All girls who had good mothers loved them, she supposed, and wanted to please them, but what of her, whose mother was not merely good, but great, who was not only her mother—though she was so frail and girlish and slender she seemed more like a soul sister—but the spiritual mother of all the hundreds and thousands who came within sound of her velvet voice, within sight of her lovely, other-world face and form? She wished passionately, almost, at times, in a state of ecstasy when Mr. Armitage was singing, when Mrs. Eastwood's organ was throbbing and thrilling through the great building her mother's faith had builded, that she could make some tremendous sacrifice for her, that she might even die for her.

But when she had expressed this, diffidently, to Angela, the evangelist had rebuked her gently and said she must live for her instead, patiently, earnestly, prayerfully, laboring beside her in the vineyard. And she must feel that she was doing her part when she rose promptly in the morning, when she was obedient to Miss Eaton and studied diligently, when she practiced her singing, when she worked in the children's classes, most of all, and hardest of all, when she gave up her mother's companionship, cheerfully and unselfishly, realizing that they, as evangelists, belonged not so much to each other as to the suffering, sinning throngs who came to drink of the river of life. And there was another way in which she could especially contribute to her mother's happiness and peace of mind, and that was by cleansing her memory—her fancy, really, since she had dreamed or imagined a good deal

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of it—of old fragments, like trash in an attic, Angela had said with the dazzling sweetness of her smile. She could resolutely turn her back upon the old difficult days, rejoicing that they had been, as stepping-stones to growth and stronger endeavor, and keep her eyes steadily forward. She knew there was Scriptural warrant for that? “Forgetting those things which are behind—I press forward—”

Even as a small child she had realized that to keep harking back to things which had happened—or which she had dreamed had happened—had the doubly disastrous effect of making her grandmother actively angry and her mother passively sad, so she had given over the habit. And there was enough, after all, in the brimming present, the beautiful, beckoning future!

She got up from her devotions with a spring, flew to her cold shower, took her breathing exercises by the open window, and dressed swiftly in her pretty tan jersey with stockings and strapped pumps to match and ran down to breakfast with her grandmother and Miss Eaton. Angela had a tray in her room. She was always weary to the point of exhaustion after a service, and after an evening of healing she frequently kept her room for two or three days, issuing at last a pale and lovely wraith. That was why it was not possible to hold the healing meetings very often. It seemed the part of wisdom to have them rather seldom and preserve the healer herself, rather than every week, every night, even, as the people implored, and sacrifice her utterly, willing and glad though she was to give herself wholly.

“It is my dear ones who hold me back,” she said once to an interviewer from the friendly *Union*. “The

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way I feel is this—if I have just so much strength to give, let me give it lavishly, with both hands, holding nothing back. And what does it matter, after all—whether I help and heal a hundred sick or sinning souls in a week—or a month or a year, so long as I am about my Master's business?" Then she had sighed a little. "But there are the dear human ties that bind, too. My blessed mother who has walked beside me all the way, often with bleeding feet, my little girl,—I must listen to their loving anxiety!"

Breakfast was cooked by one Tabernacle Worker and served by another, and directly it was over the entire household, including Harold and the son of another Worker who took care of the garden, assembled for Morning Prayer. When Angela had rested well and felt strong enough for it, they met in her room, the youths coming in on tiptoe, abashed and reverent at the sight of the evangelist against her piled up pillows which were hardly whiter than her face. Sometimes she prayed a small, velvety prayer for them, but generally it was Mother Meeker who praised or petitioned the Lord in her husky, wheezing voice, with her daughter merely adding a joyful "Amen!" or "Hallelujah!" from time to time.

Then Willow went for an hour's walk with Miss Eaton, never into the downtown parts of the city but always along the quiet residence streets, and as they went the girl recited verses and even chapters from the Bible which she had memorized. Home again, and seriously to work at her studies—English, rhetoric, composition, Bible history, ethical essays, religious poems, the lives of great evangelists. This was broken for half an hour when she practiced her singing, and

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finished at one, when they lunched. Sometimes Angela joined them, unless it was the first or second day after a healing meeting or a big baptism, but very often Miss Eaton and her pupil were alone, and the conversation was always along the lines of the studies. There were no modern novels in The Home Temple, no magazines, no newspapers, and the radio was tuned in only for the better class music or an occasional instructive lecture.

Miss Eaton was an excellent teacher, patient, painstaking, thorough, and Willow tried her best to remember to include her among her blessings when she thanked the Lord for all His mercies, but it was curious how often she forgot. She seemed to take Miss Eaton for granted, like the air she breathed. . . . It was so long now, that she had been calling her in the morning, sharing her every waking hour.

Once, motivated by an amazing impulse, Willow had stayed in her mother's room when the others left after Morning Prayer, asking Miss Eaton to excuse her for five minutes.

She went quickly to the bed, dropped to her knees, and enveloped the evangelist in a hearty young hug. "Mother dearest, I have something to ask you!" She drew a deep breath. "My heart's desire!"

"Yes, Precious? But are you sure it is not something you should ask your Heavenly Father? Mother's wisdom and power are limited, you know!" Angela gently disengaged herself.

"No—you can grant this! Mother, I don't want to have a governess or a companion any more! I want to go to school with other girls!" She was looking at the lovely face and saw it instantly cloud over,

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and she went on swiftly. "Oh, Mother, if you knew *how* I want it! There are two different schools we pass in our walks, and the girls aren't the least bit worldly looking, really! They wear dark blue skirts and middy blouses and they don't use rouge or lip stick! But they look so happy and so—so *alive*, Mother! And they like each other so much! You see—" she was tremulous with her eagerness—"I haven't really *anybody* to like, and it makes me lonesome!"

"Willow! No one to like?" the soft, shocked tones went through the pleader.

"Oh, *please* understand, Mother dearest! I love Grandmother and Miss Eaton, and I adore you, but I mean—just plain *liking*! Friends! Don't you see how it is?—I've never had a friend!"

"Never—had—a friend! Oh, *Willow*! Five thousand, loyal, redeemed souls in Hallelujah Tabernacle who would give their lives for you or for me, and yet you can say—"

Tears came into the strange hazel eyes shot with flecks of gold. "Oh, I know! I know all that! But it's different, Mother! I'm not seventeen yet, and don't you think it's natural for a girl to want girls?"

"For the children of this world, yes. For my precious lamb of God, my one ewe lamb, no! The fellowship of the saints, the blessed labor in the vineyards—ah, my child, little do you know of the world! We have sheltered you and screened you, and kept you pure—unspotted—Those girls may look sweet and simple in their uniforms, but that is only for school hours: they go to worldly homes. Dancing, theater-going, card-playing, drinking, cigarette-smoking—" she

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broke off suddenly, overcome by her feeling. "But my precious babe wants to leave the shelter of the little Home Temple and her kind, faithful Miss Eaton, and follow after the world, the flesh, and the devil!" Angela turned her face to the wall.

"Oh, Mother! Mother *dearest*! Don't cry! Please, please don't cry! You'll break my heart! Oh, I'm the wickedest girl that ever lived!" She reached penitent arms for her mother, but the evangelist moved coldly away from her, and at that moment Mrs. Meeker came trotting into the room.

Willow would never forget the half hour which followed nor the rest of the dreadful day, the racked evening, the sleepless night. Angela was prostrated. The doctor, called by telephone in a piercing voice by her mother, said he found the patient alarmingly weak and languid and in an almost dangerous state of depression. She had had a shock? Yes, that was clearly indicated. Absolute quiet; light, nourishing food; no anxiety; if possible—the removal of the cause of her mental agitation.

Brokenly, abjectly, Willow removed the cause. At length her mother, turning her wan face feebly toward her, gave her the pale ghost of her radiant smile. "Darling . . . Mother forgives you . . . Mother would always forgive you. . . ." She listened patiently to the wild protestations of penitence, to the faltering promises. "Yes, my precious . . . Mother knows you are sorry, and she believes that you will never mention it again, but—is it cleansed from your own heart, your own mind, your own soul?" The heavy white lids curtained the curiously light eyes. "Will you leave me now, Babe? I think—perhaps—

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I can sleep a little. Take it to the Lord, precious . . . on your knees. . . . Tell Him Mother has forgiven you freely and fully, and she begs Him to do the same. . . .”

They never walked past the smart private schools after that.

After luncheon Willow practiced again, and three days a week Mr. Clyde B. Armitage came to give her a singing lesson. Her mother, no matter how weary she was, made a heroic effort to be present at the lessons whenever it was possible. Her feeling was, she said, that Willow’s charming, plaintive little voice was going to be a tremendous power for good, and it thrilled her to see the progress the child was making. Sometimes he stayed over the lesson time and he and the evangelist planned the week’s music for the Tabernacle. Mr. Armitage was a composer as well as a teacher and soloist, and frequently set to music poems or psalms of Angela’s choosing, and they were arranging a long series of songs from “The Song of Songs,” which is Solomon’s.

Frequently Willow was asked to sit quietly at the other end of the room and memorize the words and the notes of her lesson, and she tried faithfully to keep her mind where it belonged, but it was so enchanting to listen to them—her mother’s velvet voice reading from the Bible in her fragile white hands:

“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth; for thy love is better than wine.”

The melting chords on the piano and the rich tenor:

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"Let him kiss me! Let him kiss . . . me. . . .
With the kisses, with the kisses of his mouth!
For thy love is better than wine!
Thy love, thy love, thy LOVE
Is better than wine!"

Her grandmother, too, made every effort to be present at the lessons, but sometimes Mr. Armitage was obliged to change the time at the last moment, and in the press of multitudinous duties which filled the Home Temple, some one would forget to tell Mother Meeker of the change, and she would miss the inspiration of the hour. Mrs. Meeker felt strongly that Miss Eaton, whose life was so filled with the cares of Willow's education, deserved the happiness of hearing her pupil's musical progress, too, and was always urging her to be present, even when she could not be there herself. Angela's feeling, however, was that dear Miss Eaton needed a little time *away* from Willow, devoted as she was to her, just as a mother refreshed herself by a brief absence, and came back renewed, and she suggested those times as Miss Eaton's opportunity to do her errands or visit her friends, or merely rest quietly in her own room.

Mrs. Meeker's other point was that Willow, naturally diffident and shy, would benefit by singing and practicing before as many people as possible.

"No, Mother dear, you are mistaken there," the evangelist argued gently. "Clyde feels that a pupil does best alone, or almost alone with the teacher, that the feeling of freedom—"

"Never knew he was a teacher," said the older woman.

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"He is a most excellent, an inspired, teacher," said her daughter with dignity, "and we are very fortunate in securing him for Willow, not to mention what he does for our Tabernacle."

Once or twice Miss Eaton had come in to listen, even after the evangelist's thoughtful concern for her recreation, but it chanced to be the times, Willow regretted, when Mr. Armitage found himself either in a hurry or out of the mood for composition, so she missed the real music after all. The same thing happened frequently, likewise, when Mother Meeker came in to listen, so Willow felt herself very fortunate. By keeping mousily quiet in the other end of the room her presence did not disturb them at all.

Certain afternoons she spent in the Tabernacle, serving on the flower committee or teaching her classes among The Children of Light, but always Miss Eaton was at her side, guiding her when she needed guidance, rebuking her when she needed rebuking, silent when she approved of her. It was odd that so negative a personality could be so positive in her functioning. She had the effect, sometimes, in spite of her close and constant companionship, of making the girl feel very lonely. She did not analyze the thing consciously, but there was in the back of her mind the feeling of how gay and wonderful all that intimacy might be with some one she liked, who liked her . . . in spite of the frightful lesson in contentment after the school matter, the thought of *liking* persisted. Her beautiful mother smiled at her with a heart-warming radiance, all the Workers beamed on her, and even her grandmother gave her glances of distinct approval, especially when other people were about, but her

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dear teacher regarded her always with wooden impassivity. Miss Eaton, Willow was wistfully sure, did not like her.

The only moments when the governess-companion might have disproved this charge were beyond her pupil's knowledge—those morning periods when she came to wake her, and stood looking down on her fresh golden glory.

Every evening in the week, save Thursday, when the evangelist took her meager recreation—sometimes a concert, sometimes a drive to the hills, sometimes only a much-needed rest in her room,—there were services of some sort in the Tabernacle, and most of them Willow attended. These were her happiest times, when, looking down at the upturned faces, thrilling with the throb of the great organ, with the tenor solo, with the mighty volume of the congregation's singing, with the look in Mrs. Mercer's eyes, in Harold's, she seemed to float on a sea of holy and ecstatic sound.

Most of all when Angela, her mother—*her—own—mother*—came forward in her gleaming robes, her white lids hooding her shining eyes, and prayed—the pale Angel of five thousand faithful souls—

“Jesus dear . . . Jesus *de-urr*—”

A rustle would go over the closely-packed throng like a soft wind through a wheat field. The believers wriggled happily in their seats and Willow exhaled a long, slow sigh of rapture. It was like those magic hours when she sat breathlessly still in her corner, only more wonderful, for the thousands were sharing it, pulsing with her in passionate adoration:

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"I sleep, but my heart waketh; it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled—"

"Oh, Jesus, dear, I hear you calling me, and through me the broken hearts gathered here to be bathed in your tears and washed clean in your blood! We will open to you, beloved! Oh, come in, come in and abide with us, Jesus dear . . . Jesus *de-urr*. . . ."

Chapter XII

YOUNG ARDEN DEXTER went away for a week and came back jubilant. He had his mother summon The Three Wise Men and the visiting nurse to hear the result of his findings, and they met again in the mellow living room, the ruddy priest, the dark rabbi, and the gray clergyman.

The boy looked rested, in spite of his chase after evidence. "For once," Nan Hollister told him, "you look as if you'd had nearly enough sleep! I hate newspaper eyes."

"Thanks," said Arden. "Nine hours a night, out in the sticks! Well, I've got the wood on 'em! I know where she buried the body!"

"Arden! You don't mean—"

"Well, not literally, Muz, though she could get away with murder, at that! No; I mean I've just uncovered the back tracks—and some of 'em are pretty slimy." He lighted a cigarette and made himself utterly comfortable in the snuggling, puppy fashion he had never outgrown. "Crying out loud, this thing would make a movie that would knock 'em for a loop!" He considered the thought for a moment. "Well, the first shot would be a little old bush league circus."

"A circus, Arden?" Dr. Davidson was keen on the scent. "You mean, they were show people? We might almost have guessed it, mightn't we?—the cleverness of the performance at the Tabernacle—"

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"Yeah. Mother Meeker was wardrobe mistress and Angel did some pretty crude dancing and a little timid trapeze stuff and some scared riding. It was her looks and her personality that put her over, I gather. Had a lot of suitors—the bozos under the canvas and various village hicks, but the old gal was aiming high, even then. She didn't intend to wear sawdust in her hair all her days, and she gave 'em all the air, but there was one bird with more zip than the rest, for he picked the angel up and ran off with her. Carroll—our man that was working that clew—couldn't get very much dope about her marriage, except that she was very young, and that he was the strong man of the show—a big, good-looking foreigner who had a weird mouthful of a name that he translated into Willow. Ed. Willow. Well, just a few weeks after that he took a spill from the top of the tent where he'd climbed to fix a rope, and broke his neck. The women stayed with the show until the girl couldn't perform any longer, and then her daughter—the granddaughter—was born."

"Willow, The Golden Girl!" Mrs. Dexter smiled at the tawdry charm of the syllables.

"Yeah. It seems the circus went on the rocks about that time owing everybody months of back salaries, and the Willow-Meeker family was stony broke. After the kid was born they joined up with the Salvation Army for a while—not that there was anything godly about 'em in those days, but any port in a storm. Their whole future developed from the fact that the Army people took the Angel out on the street one night for their regular service, and asked her to say a word of gratitude, if any, and Angela, white as death

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and pretty weak and wobbly still, gasped out a few scared sentences and she was a riot! After that Mother Meeker took charge and saw to it that she rose up in meeting and got the spot on her, but they overdid it. Carroll found the old Salvation Army vet who was the captain at that time. He was very mild and gentle in what he had to say, but Carroll dug it out of him—nice old high-cheekboned Swede with sea-blue eyes, Carroll said—that they finally had to let them go because they *exaggerated*! You know there's no four-flushing in the Army, and he said they began to draw crowds in an undesirable way, so they parted, amicably enough, and he's still their well wisher."

"Well, Glory be to God!" chuckled Father McNamara enjoyingly. "First a circus and then the Salvationists! Weren't they ever in the pictures?"

"No, but I'm betting they will be! Well, they beat it out of that town—that was the best thing they did, folding their tents like the Arabs—and moved into another, the woman, the girl, the baby, and picked out the most hysterical church they could find and signed on the dotted line. They did that again and again. And all the time Angela was getting smoother in her work. Still, something always went wrong: usually, we deduce, some brethren got too well saved and some sistren got sore! We lose sight of 'em altogether for a while, but that's not serious, for it was the same sort of thing all along until they descended on Deer-ville, somewhere in Iowa."

Dr. Davidson nodded. "I know Deerville. I substituted there one Sunday, fifteen—twenty years ago. I went by train then, of course, but now—"

"I drove it in seven hours," Arden answered. "Yes,

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there's a break in the continuity up to there, but we can fill it in from the general action. They—which means Angela's beauty and her way of stalling along,—weak flesh and willing spirit stuff—and the old woman's sound business sense—had been a good deal of a hit in some town near by, and they were invited to go to Deerville. The big noise in the Deerville church was a retired missionary named Turner—Beriah Turner, who'd lived in the Orient for years and been sent home to die, only he wasn't keeping the date."

"Had a rendezvous with Death, but he ran out on him!" Nan supplemented.

"Yeah. It seems they went to live at his house; widowed sister looked out for him. One of the nice old front family residences."

"But, Arden," his mother wanted to know, "how did you find out all these things?"

"It was a cinch there, Muz! I had the name of the church, and went there and said what I wanted, and they turned me right over to the village Book of Knowledge—an acid old gal who comes when you call Miss Ella Meers. Pure vinegar in her veins. She shot the whole works for me from Genesis to Revelation—specially Revelation! I was wise in ten minutes that she had marked the missionary for her own before the Terrible Meekers came to town."

"Then," said Dr. Davidson carefully, "you were obliged to take her reportings with a grain of salt, Arden."

"I could have taken them with the Salton Sea and still had enough!" the boy exulted. "So, they established themselves in the old missionary's house and went right into action with the church, and it seems

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Angela went over very big with the rank and file. Only the Meers woman and a few of her kind had their harpoons out, but although they saw what was coming they couldn't stop it. In record time—it must have been smooth work as well as snappy—Angela Meeker Willow became the pale bride of Brother Beriah Turner!"

"The bold jade!" the priest ejaculated.

"No, Father McNamara, she was never that," Arden turned to him. "Always soft, gentle, sweet, die-away. That's how she landed him."

"Wise as the serpent and harmless as the dove," Rabbi Meyer contributed.

"All of that!"

"Disgusting," said his mother.

"Just a little matter of forty odd years' difference in their ages, that's all! But can't you picture Mother Meeker licking her chops, looking like the cat that ate the canary? Of course, she stage-managed the whole thing. The Meers woman had the decency to say that the Angel gave an excellent imitation of a perfectly miserable wife. Except when she was in the pulpit! Then she came to life, all right, and it was there—in Deerville—that she pulled off the first healing stunt."

The clergyman nodded. "Yes. I remember. There was a good deal in the papers."

"Yeah. Some moron thought she was cured of something she probably never had, but they rushed her out of town before there was a chance for any relapses! Mother Meeker was too wise to take any chances. Well, it seems the old man nearly lost his mind with pride and joy, and started right in to see about building a new church to house the healing ministry of his

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celestial spouse, ran himself ragged in hot weather, got a stroke, and sat mumbling in a chair the rest of his days."

"I should say," said Mrs. Dexter crisply, "that it served the old idiot quite right."

"Yeah. And the day he died—almost at the same moment, Miss Meers declared—twin boys were born!"

"Now, somebody else tell one!" said Nan Hollister.

"Straight goods," Arden protested. "I know it sounds phony—exactly the sort of thing you'd make up. But you can go to Deerville and find out for yourself!"

"Well, but what became of them? Did Mother Terrible Meeker drown 'em?"

"I wouldn't put it past her!" Father McNamara wiped his eyes.

"No, the sister took 'em,—the missionary's sister, who kept house for him. She was a widow and crazy about kids, and, of course, Angela was pleased pink to get rid of 'em. How they would have cramped her style! A grown daughter is bad enough, but two husky brutes of boys—"

"Did you see them?"

"No. They were off somewhere with the Deerville Basket Ball Team, and the aunt had trailed along,—dippy over 'em still, I gathered. I'll go back and interview her, of course, but I really have all the dope."

"Did he leave her any money, Arden?"

"I'll say! Left her everything, but when they decided to ditch the Gold-dusters she had to come across, naturally. This Mrs. Bascom hadn't anything and she didn't want anything for herself. (She listens

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like a straight shooter.) But she made Angela deed the house to the boys and enough downtown property to see 'em through for food and clothes and schooling. Then Mother Meeker and Angela and the kid did a vanishing act with all the loose cash, leaving a permanent address with a city trust company where the rents and dividends were to be sent."

"Of all the sordid stories—" Mrs. Dexter made a grimace.

"And it's been comparatively plain sailing since then, I suppose?" Dr. Davidson asked.

"Smooth! They've done it with their feet in a sack. For the first time in their lives, you see, they had money enough to live on, so they could take their time, pick and choose. Nothing spectacular between Deerville and here—just a steady, carefully worked out progress. It seems the big idea has always been California; that's their Promised Land, but there's a woman out there with the Standing Room Only sign out all the time, seven days a week, so they've been foxy enough not to try it. They've been improving in their methods all the time, and now they're making money like a mint."

"The old woman is shrewd; that I saw at once," said Rabbi Meyer.

The boy turned to him with the quick deference which—against his brisk modernity and hectic diction—his elders found distinctly soothing. "Yes, Rabbi. And I've been wanting to ask—the Three Wise Men went to a healing service while I was gone. What were your findings?"

The three clerics looked at each other for an instant before the priest spoke.

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"Well, then, my lad, we found three things and each one of them different! We disagreed, I'm telling you, wholly and heartily. Myself, now—I say the trollop's as much the show-man as the old wrinkledy hag, her mother! For all her soft, silky ways and the face like new milk she has on her—" he broke off and looked expectantly at Rabbi Meyer.

The Jew put the tips of his dark-skinned fingers together. "It is my opinion she is motivated entirely by the mother. She is—I consider—a spineless, will-less case of arrested development; almost no brain. She has been trained like an animal to do certain things a certain way, and she does them, either for fear of punishment or hope of reward."

"You mean—" Mrs. Dexter leaned forward—"a sort of Svengali and Trilby combination."

"Yes! Exactly what I mean."

"Uncle Jim?" Arden turned affectionately toward the clergyman who gave him a faint smile before answering. Dr. Davidson shared the anxiety of his generation as to the young people of the day, but it was always allayed when he found himself with Arden Dexter and Nan Hollister.

"Well, Arden, you're going to be astonished at what I say, but it is my very honest conviction. I believe she is sincere."

"Uncle Jim! But—holy cats! When I tell you—"

"Yes. I know what you're going to say, and I'm not holding any brief for the angel, I beg you to believe. I see, as clearly as you do yourself, that she is a vain, shallow, tawdry little person, greedy for money and publicity, largely controlled by the mother, as our friend here feels, and likewise—" he turned

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to the priest—"a good deal of the clever poseur Father McNamara thinks her. But, nevertheless, I maintain that she has her moments of absolute sincerity."

Mrs. Dexter, her plainness arresting beneath the portrait of her decorative husband, shook her head at him. "Jim! How can you?"

He was stubborn. "I insist that when she is in the pulpit, preaching—"

"—That rubber-stamp, obvious, stale patter, commonplace and stereotyped—" she interrupted.

"Granted. It is all you say. But I still maintain that she means it while she's saying it! It is a state of hysteria, ecstasy; deliberate and calculated, I will admit, but—for what it is—genuine. And I believe Mother Meeker thinks it is genuine. I remember, Maud, what you said after your first visit to the Tabernacle."

"I certainly never said that charlatan was sincere, Jim!"

"No. But you did say your theory was that the two women were afraid of each other."

"Oh! Yes, I remember saying that, and I still believe it. I believe Angela is dominated by the mother, and that the mother lives in terror of the time—the remote but possible time—when she may get out of hand. But I am convinced that the whole affair is a cold-blooded matter of business and theatricals—that they put on a clever show for money."

The clergyman was obdurate. "I agree with you utterly that they fear each other, and that they watch each other, stealthily and warily, but I hold to my conviction that Mother Meeker and the angel herself feel that a power above and outside of them dominates

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her when she steps forward and closes her eyes—”

“Gorgeous eyelids,” Mrs. Dexter murmured.

“—and begins—‘Jesus dear! Jesus *de-urr!*’”

“I’m to interview her personally next week, Uncle Jim,” said Arden. “At least, they’ve taken my request under advisement. If I pull it off I’ll report to you whether I’ve come round to your opinion.”

“You won’t, I daresay, Arden. And the interview will not prove anything. They have, I’ve no doubt, a carefully prepared and memorized talk for newspaper people. I should like enormously to accept her invitation to sit on the platform and study her during a whole service.”

“Well, but—why don’t you?”

A maid had come into the room with coffee and creamed oysters in pâté shells and tiny hot biscuits, and Dr. Davidson helped himself to a modest portion. “Well, my dear fellow—when I should be studying her hostilely, ready to hand over my findings to you and your paper?”

“That cramps your style, I can see, Uncle Jim, but I have no more compunction than a head-hunter. She’s wise to the fact that the *Standard* is against her, automatically, because the *Union* is for her.” After his elders had been served in a small, busy pause, the youth took two pâtés and three biscuits. “She won’t want to talk to me, but she’ll know I’ll make capital of a refusal.” His eyes followed the maid out of the room. “Snappy work, Muz!” he turned approvingly to his mother. “*Very* easy to look at it! Thanks for giving Huldah the gate!”

“But I didn’t,” said Mrs. Dexter, a trifle ruefully. “She gave notice, more in sorrow than in anger, be-

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cause she had overheard us taking the name of the Tabernacle and the Angel in vain."

"Well, what do you know?" her son inquired delightedly. "Well, the new one's a pippin, anyhow. I'm going to interview Mother Meeker, too, if I can. That ought to be a hot number!"

"And the girl?" Nan Hollister wanted to know.

Dr. Davidson, giving to his excellent little supper a scant and grudging attention at variance with the frank and hearty appetite of the priest, the restrained, gourmet's satisfaction of the rabbi, looked up quickly at the girl's question—at a faint something in her tone rather than her words—and his glance went in rapid succession from her to the boy, to the jocund painted presence of Hart Dexter above them.

"The whole works," Arden answered her promptly, "the big bear, the medium-sized bear, and the little bear! And she *is* a bear, I'll say!—Muz, if you'll give your Bathing Beauty a ring, I could do with a cup of coffee!—and likewise and also and moreover, I'm to have a quiet and confidential interview with Mrs. Clyde B. Armitage, who is said to be oozing domestic difficulties at every pore, and ready to spill her troubles."

The visiting nurse, who was looking after the clerics in her casual but capable fashion, sat down on the floor beside him with her plate on her lap. "Will you interview the three Meekers together or separately, Ard?"

"Oh, separately, of course! One bear at a time and that done well—"

"I should think," she said, eating with her usual honest enthusiasm, "it would be a lot better and more

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effective to have them together, so you could study their attitude toward each other."

"Nope, you're wrong, Nan."

"Maybe I am," she agreed indifferently.

"Yeah. One at a time—Mother Meeker, the Angel, the Golden Girl! And the last'll be pretty easy to take! *Gee*, she's a landscape!" He finished a pâté and held out his empty plate with a smile to the pretty little waitress.

"His mother's son!" James Davidson reflected with a faint resentment in his tolerant amusement.

Chapter XIII

YOUNG ARDEN DEXTER did not carry out his plan for interviewing the three evangelists separately for his paper, after all.

Mother Meeker told him, briskly and pleasantly, that the only time in their extremely busy day (and any other day would be equally full, so there was no point in postponement) when they could see him was an hour which they had planned to spend together in special study. This they would forego, in order that Mr. Dexter might have an opportunity to tell their many friends who read the *Standard* something of their life and aspirations.

They received him in the cheerful, nondescript parlor of their dwelling. "This is what our brethren call 'The Home Temple,' " the older woman said, smiling at him with an admixture of motherliness and other-worldly benignity. "But we call it just our little humble home, and it is very sweet to us, and of course we think there is no place like it!" She was wheezily arch. "I suppose one reason why we feel that way is because we have so little leisure to spend in it, what with all the demands of our church work, so it's doubly precious as a haven of rest and the refuge of the simple, tender joys of family life."

She spoke very rapidly in a curiously flat and toneless voice, and the difficulty with her breathing made

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her seem always in haste to get something said. She placed the youth with warm hospitality on a stiff and inhospitable chair, and seated herself with the other two on a couch, with their backs to the light.

That, Arden thought, was accident rather than guile, for certainly the Angel and the Golden Girl need not evade the garish day, and the older woman made not the faintest gesture toward beauty. She wore, as did her daughter, the Tabernacle Worker's garb of plain white dress and uncompromising gray cape, but Willow was in coppery tan.

The interviewer began easily, with stock questions which could be answered promptly and without thought, and watched the trio closely while they spoke. Mother Meeker was clearly the manager of the hearth and home as well as of the Tabernacle; she stage-managed the talk, and frequently interrupted daughter or granddaughter and finished a sentence upon which they were starting—"Daughter would love to hold the healings oftener, Mr. Dexter, but it just takes it out of her so! Humanly speaking, she's just simply all in, after it's over—weak as a cat, and limp as a rag!" Then, feeling her similes inelegant and too much on the lay order, she gasped an afterthought. "Spirit willing but flesh weak!"

Angela, at that point, let the pale passivity of her face slip into the smile of unearthly sweetness. "My own feeling is that it does not matter . . . whether I am the channel for healing a hundred in a week or a month or six months . . . just so long as I am about my Father's business." Arden remembered Nan's adjective. She *was* "sheer"—and just as much so, oddly enough, in the severity of white linen and gray

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serge as in the silver and "glistening" robes in the pulpit. The older woman was thick, compact, solid, but her daughter had an amazing quality of translucence.

His chief preoccupation was of course with her, but he found himself looking often and enjoyingly at Willow. His mother was right, as she generally was: the girl had an expression of almost startling innocence. It was only veneer, of course; no girl could grow to womanhood in that atmosphere of cant and pretense and tawdriness and fail to be impregnated with it, but it was astonishing how well she held it, and the respect with which she listened to her grandmother, the rapt adoration with which she gazed at her mother.

"She's a slick job," he told himself, delightedly. "The slickest of the three, by gad!"

His mother was right, too, about the wariness of Mother Meeker's handling of the Angel: there was no possible doubt about it. Under Angela's sweet and daughterly deference there was a veiled impatience and rebellion, but with the other it was a deeper and more sinister thing. Young Arden, letting his fancy off its leash, decided she was like an animal trainer who kept an eternal vigilance with whip and goad, and yet secretly expected to be one day slain by the beautiful prize lion.

He turned suddenly to look Willow straight in her golden hazel eyes and asked her a direct question.

She colored exquisitely, but answered him steadily and gravely, and her grandmother finished her sentence for her.

"Yes, Willow is a laborer in the vineyard! Yes, I should say she is! From the time she was a babe, our

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little lamb of God, our one ewe lamb, she has come apart and been separate! She is a child of light, not of the children of this world."

There was a low knock at the door, and a woman entered. "Is Willow ready to practice?" she inquired of Mother Meeker. Arden, giving her a hasty glance, saw that she was an unusually plain woman of young middle age, with a colorless skin and indefinite features, and was a little puzzled to see how earnestly and almost eagerly she scrutinized him.

"Well, if our good friend, Mr. Dexter, has finished—" Mother Meeker began, again with the heavy archness. "This is Miss Eaton, Mr. Dexter, Willow's companion for many years and our valued friend."

The interviewer said firmly that he had several more questions to ask, and the grandmother said Willow might remain, then. Wouldn't Miss Eaton sit down and wait?

The boy clipped a grin. The old girl was going to hold the family group intact as long as he polluted the premises! United they stood; divided, there might be a careless break. He went on with his interview, paying scant attention to the letter of their answers, much more engulfed in expressions and attitudes. He was surprised to have the companion address him in a voice as colorless as the rest of her.

"Excuse me, Mr. Dexter, but are you Mrs. Hart Dexter's son?—Maud Glendon's son?"

"Yes. You know my mother?"

"Oh, no!" She was hasty and deprecating about it. "But I know—I have known—people who knew her, and I've heard a great deal about her. She is a very unusual woman."

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He gave her an instant of puzzled attention. "I think so, naturally," he said civilly. He spun out his interview as long as he could, thanked them for his paper and himself and went away, well satisfied on the whole.

"I wonder," said Willow, as the door closed behind him, "what makes his eyes look like that?—Tired looking, and tiny red lines."

"Dissipation," said her grandmother, promptly.

"I don't agree with you," Miss Eaton returned quickly. "Almost all newspaper writers have eyes like that; it's the night work."

"Possibly," Mother Meeker grudged. "But a thoroughly worldly youth. Now you may go to practice, Willow."

As they went up the stairs the girl put her hand on the companion's arm. "I'm glad you think it isn't dissipation," she said. "Miss Eaton, I know, of course, he is of the world, but—except for that—didn't you think he was—" she stopped and did not speak for three steps, groping for a word—"the kind of person you would *like*?"

"I liked him," her preceptress agreed, a tinge of warmth in her cold voice.

Miss Eaton, Willow reflected to herself that night, was different, some way. Not as she had always been. She was kinder to her, less sharp in her reprimands; this was curious, too, for her mood in general did not seem to be mellowed; her manner toward Mother Meeker and Angela was regrettably edgy at times. What was the reason? What could be the reason? Why, the girl wondered with entirely genuine humility, should she be growing fonder of herself, the least worthy of them all, and less fond of the good grand-

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mother, the angelic mother? Lying wakeful in the bed with the golden hangings, she tried to remember when the change had become apparent. They were unfailingly kind to her! Grandmother, of course, was impatient at times, but she was with them all; it was her nerves, overstrained with the long years of arduous evangelistic work, with poverty and anxiety, with the conduct of the multitudinous affairs of the great Tabernacle. Sifting, examining, rejecting, she decided at last that it had started with the day she had gone into the room where she thought Willow was having her singing lesson. Willow had just left the room to get a piece of music which Mr. Armitage had left downstairs in his overcoat pocket. Every one thought Miss Eaton was lying down with a severe eye-headache, but she had felt suddenly better, and decided to enjoy the evidence of her charge's musical progress. The girl, coming upstairs, had met Miss Eaton coming down, and the governess-companion's face had made her cry out in alarm.

"Miss Eaton! Oh—what is it?"

"It's nothing—never mind—" the woman had replied hastily. "My eyes are hurting horribly; I shouldn't have come out of the darkened room. I'm going right back. I went in to hear you, but—"

"I just went down for Mr. Armitage's music." Willow had put a timid arm about her; Miss Eaton never liked being touched. "Won't you come back, now?"

"No! No, I won't come back! I'm not going in again!" The refusal was so emphatic, so explosive, almost, that the girl guessed what must have happened. Mr. Armitage, who, like any other artist or genius,

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Angela had explained to her, was very, very sensitive and tormented by temperament and nerves, had been rude to poor Miss Eaton, and she resented it. She started to say something, delicately, about it, but her teacher had interrupted her sharply, speaking about her eyes and her head, flung herself down the hall and into her own room and locked the door.

Yes; that had been the beginning. It was wrong of her to visit wrath upon Mother and Grandmother, just because Mr. Armitage had been rude, and it was strange of her to be kinder and gentler with her pupil. Willow was vaguely unhappy. Something had happened to the bright serenity which had brooded hitherto over the Hallelujah Tabernacle and the Home Temple: it was not only Miss Eaton, but her mother and grandmother as well. They were always sending her out of the room or leaving the room themselves, breaking off shortly in a heated conversation when she came in: she was always glimpsing the vanishing edges of quarrels.

It made her sick with grief and a vague apprehension which she could not define nor understand. Poor Grandmother's nerves must be worse than ever before, and Mother must be frailer and weaker—that thought struck cold terror to her heart—and less able to bear the older woman's irritability. In some way, for some reason—the affair with Miss Eaton doubtless, and the patent dislike which the tenor and Mother Meeker displayed toward each other—she began to hold Clyde B. Armitage responsible and to wish hotly that he might go away, out of their public and private lives. There was no joy now in her singing lessons nor the periods following when she sat memorizing her songs

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and listening to the composition of his new solo—her mother's velvet voice:

"The voice of my belovéd! . . . My belovéd spake and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. . . .
"For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone . . ."

and the rich tenor, feeling its way, exploring into strange harmonies:

"My belovéd spake . . .

And said unto me . . . and said un . . . to . . .
. . . meeeeee . . .

Rise up, my love!

Rise up, my fair one, and come away!

And come, and come, and COME a . . . way. . . .
A-WAY!"

It was as wonderful as ever, and as beautiful, but if Mr. Armitage's temperament and Grandmother's nerves and Miss Eaton's feelings were all being jumbled together to disaster, to the making of this strain and edginess, then wouldn't it be better for the Tabernacle to have another soloist, herself another teacher?

She had made this suggestion to her grandmother who had stared at her truculently for an instant and then, surprisingly, beamed upon her. She was a good girl and a smart girl, and why didn't she go right straight to her mother and tell her how she felt? Right now, before Mother got up? Just tell Mother in her own words, from her own heart, how she felt about it? How she felt like she'd learned all Mr. Armitage could

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teach her, and how she'd like to try studying with a lady for a change and couldn't they try Miss Hammer, the contralto in the Tabernacle Choir who was admitted to be one of the finest instructors in the city?

Willow had gone gladly to the evangelist's silvery room, but she had come away with her pinions trailing. It was almost as terrible as the time she had wanted to go to the private school for girls and find somebody to really *like*. Angela had been cruelly hurt at her little girl's ingratitude, at her setting up of her own judgment, at her allowing herself to be influenced by poor, dear Miss Eaton's little hurt feelings; once again she had turned her face to the wall, and it had taken Willow a long time to make her peace.

But had she made her peace? Was it really peace? Her mother, mistily, had forgiven her, and she had looked back through the blur of her own tears to see her melting whitely into her pillow, pale as the linen itself, and things had gone forward as before, but there was no peace in the Home Temple.

The girl sat up in bed and turned her hot pillow. There was a little spot of damp warmth where she had wept into it, and she got resolutely out and knelt down on the floor and prayed long and fervently. It must all come right. It must! They were all so good, all doing so much good, God must be pleased with them, and He would soon lift this cloud of disharmony away, and let the sun of holy happiness shine again . . . She asked Him very earnestly to let the boy with the tired eyes put something kind in his paper about them. Willow had never read a newspaper in all her life, but she knew from her family that the *Standard* was not very kind to Hallelujah Tabernacle, usually. . . . Yet

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he had looked kind, that boy; merry; Miss Eaton had liked him. . . .

The lonesomeness of not having any one to like! You loved your mother and your grandmother and your good, faithful teacher, and all the loyal souls in the flock, and God, of course. You loved God and His only begotten Son, and you adored your mother, even when you were clumsy and selfish and rough and hurt her . . . but it would be so nice, so jolly, just to *like* some one. . . .

Drowsiness overcame her. She went back to bed, a little chilly after her devotions and snuggled under the covers.

Grandmother said—"dissipation" but Miss Eaton said not. . . . It was Miss Eaton, surely, who knew most about worldly matters. . . .

Chapter XIV

THE pretty new maid came in to Mrs. Dexter's living room to say that Miss Eaton was calling, and if she couldn't see the lady herself, might she see Mr. Arden?

"Miss Edna Eaton?" Mrs. Dexter had never heard the name, and decided the woman was an agent. Her son had just come in, and Dr. Davidson was due for tea any moment now, and Nan Hollister, if she could get away for half an hour in her afternoon's busyness, so she told the servant to say that she was engaged.

The maid was back in a moment. "She says—could she see Mr. Arden then, for three minutes? It's about Hallelujah Tabernacle."

"What was the name?" Arden looked up. "Eaton? Muz, I believe that's the companion,—the Golden Girl's keeper! Let's have her in, shall we?"

"You'd better see her in the hall, Arden; she might be difficult to dismiss—one of that wild-eyed band!"

"Oh, this one is as mild as a sheep," he assured her, but he followed the maid to the front door.

The governess-companion stood just inside, her hands clasped tensely together, and she began to speak as soon as she saw him, rapidly, as if fearing he might not hear her out. "I'm only asking for a moment, Mr. Dexter. I am Edna Eaton, Willow Meeker's companion. You met me the day you interviewed them all, but of course you wouldn't remember."

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"I remember you perfectly," he said civilly. As a matter of fact, he thought, this was the sort of person you did remember just because she was so abysmally plain and ordinary.

She went on swiftly. "The interview amounted to nothing, of course. I realized that. You wanted to see them separately. Well, if you would care to interview the girl alone, I can arrange it."

"She is willing to see me again—to give me an interview?"

Miss Eaton shook her head. "She knows nothing of it, but we walk every day. To-morrow morning at nine-thirty we will be walking in Glendon Park. Could you meet us there—without seeming to meet us?"

Arden hesitated. The woman seemed oddly eager; her pallid face twitched painfully and her eyes held his with a positive appeal. "Well, Miss Eaton, I hardly see the point. My interview was published this morning. There would be no advantage in a second one so soon, and she would merely repeat what she said to me before."

"No! That's just it!" She pressed nearer to him, and her breath was coming fast. "She'll be alone—away from them—especially her grandmother. Oh, I want you to see her and talk to her when she is by herself—when she *is* herself!"

The creature's intensity of feeling was astonishing. Coached, of course, but almost as clever as the Angel herself. His interview with Mother Meeker, The Angel of Hallelujah Tabernacle and The Golden Girl had been, he admitted to himself with frank young satisfaction, a pretty smooth piece of work. He had faithfully recorded what they had said, but with tiny

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epilogues of his own, innocuous on the face of them, but delicious reading for the intelligentsia. His mother was delighted with it, and even Nan Hollister, harshest of his critics, considered it the best thing he had ever done. Crude as she was, Mother Meeker was doubtless able to estimate the effect of it, and now she wanted to wipe it out, partially at least, by letting him have a private interview with the little lamb of God, trusting to her pulchritude, her registered innocence.

He stood in silence for an instant, scowling.

"It would be a real interview this time," the woman urged. "You could ask her—whatever you liked."

Something in his brain clicked suddenly. "All right! I'll meet you, and I'll interview her along very different lines."

"*Thank* you!" She was absolutely fervent about it. "And now, I know your mother is engaged, but—"

"She is expecting guests for tea any moment, now."

"Yes. But I would not detain her a moment. If I could just—look at her, and at the room where she spends her time—" Incredibly, without waiting for permission, the governess-companion was stepping down the hall, almost running in her haste, and entering the living room. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Dexter! I won't stay but an instant. I wanted to see you, that's all."

Mrs. Dexter, who did not rise from her low chair at the corner of the fireplace, the intimate tea table waiting beside her, looked up in surprise, but she spoke pleasantly. "What did you want to see me about?"

The caller shook her head. "Not *about* anything.

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Just to see you, and this room. I can tell a great deal from a living room." She stood still in the center of it, and let her pale eyes travel slowly from wall to wall as if cataloguing line and color, the beauty of rich bindings, the appeal of thoughtfully chosen etchings and water-colors, the arresting portrait of the master of the house. Her gaze came at last to Mrs. Dexter, remaining upon her with a frank and eager scrutiny, and while the manner of her entrance and her naked curiosity were brazen, there was nothing brazen in Miss Eaton herself. Under the boldness of her action, put on, the watcher felt, like a raincoat for a storm, there was a terrified shyness and reserve, begging abjectly for pardon and understanding.

Mrs. Dexter found her pathetic, and something of her feeling must have communicated itself to her plain face, for the intruder flushed suddenly, gulped a low—"Thank you!—" and rushed out even more precipitately than she had entered, almost colliding with Dr. James Davidson and the visiting nurse.

She stood even longer than was her usual custom, looking down at her pupil before waking her next morning, but her manner was even sharper than ever in the former days, before her softening. It did not depress Willow, however. Nothing could depress her then, while the glow of yesterday's happiness was still upon her.

While Miss Eaton had been away, the afternoon before, on some private business of her own, an amazing, dazzlingly happy thing had taken place at the Home Temple. Her mother and her grandmother had been shut up together for hours, refusing her admit-

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tance, and when she walked past the closed door painful sounds issued—sharp recriminations, murmured reproaches, muffled weeping. After a distressingly long while Angela had come out, her lovely eyes looking like submarine gardens, and told Willow to have Harold bring the car. The girl had ventured a murmur of timid sympathy, and her mother had smiled with a sort of drowned sweetness and asked if she would like to drive with her for an hour, not talking, just letting poor Mother rest. . . .

After that, happiness had unfolded like a flower. Harold, clumsy and beaming with joy, making a mess of his gears at the beginning, Angela lying back with her white lids lowered, faintly reddened and fuller than ever, letting her delicate hand rest in her daughter's tender and adoring clasp; the smooth progress over pavements and out of the press into quiet country roads.

"Anywhere, Harold," the evangelist had said. "Away . . . I need the healing of quiet. . . ."

At first, in the little brown road which climbed steadily into the hills, Willow had resented the finding of Mrs. Mercer in her Tabernacle Worker's garb, trudging sturdily upward; it was so precious to have her mother quite to herself. But it had all fitted in perfectly in the pattern of joy.

Mrs. Mercer, that drab, monosyllabic person with snuff-colored hands with swollen purple veins, had a house in the country! It was, she explained in her short, jerky scraps of sentences, nothing at all—just a cabin. She kept it provisioned. She came out to it once a week, perhaps, once in ten days, when she could slip away from Tabernacle duties. She had a

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room in the city. This was a sort of—refuge. Nobody knew about it. There was no road. You had to go quarter of a mile by foot. *Yes!* She would show it to Angel. She would be *proud* to show it to Angel, and Miss Willow could come.

The girl observed that she did not include Harold. It was a pity, for poor Harold was a lonely soul, and a friendly soul under his diffidence, but Mrs. Mercer, she knew, disliked and distrusted all men. Her husband had treated her terribly, Miss Eaton said, and then deserted her, and she had stopped believing in everybody, even in God, until she came to Hallelujah Tabernacle and heard its angel preacher. The evangelist had given her back to faith.

Harold stayed in the car, and the others made the winding, mounting walk to the cabin. It was most skillfully hidden. There was even an old fence, topped with barbed wire, which looked impassable, but which folded back like a gate when you knew where to look for the fastening. Mrs. Mercer's sallow cheeks were stained with a dark flush as she watched Angela delicately picking her way over the rough trail. It was a very tiny house, concealed by shrouding shrubbery, but enough had been cunningly cut away to let the one large window look out and frame a lovely bit of landscape. Beside the main room there was a cubby-hole for bathing and dressing and a microscopic kitchenette. The furniture was made up of shabby odds and ends of old walnut, and there was a prim single bed with an exquisitely made patch-work quilt, a low couch by the window, a table, chairs, and a little fireplace.

"Plenty wood," the owner made a stiff gesture

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toward the bountiful out-of-doors. "Water, spring." Mrs. Mercer pared her sentences down rigidly.

Angela put a gentle hand on the bowed shoulder. "Dear Sister Mercer, it is sweet—*sweet!* Peaceful!" Her eyes grew misty. "Ah, how long it is since I have seen anything so peaceful. . . ." She walked to the mantel and lifted a little vase of withered flowers which stood before a picture of herself in her silvery robes. "You haven't been here recently, Sister Mercer! Willow would love to gather fresh flowers for you. Shall we throw these away?" She started to drop them into the fireplace, but the Tabernacle Worker sprang toward her with a smothered cry. A dark, painful color suffused her face, making it look like the veins in her snuff-hued hands. "No! No! *Yours!*"

"Mine, Sister Mercer?" (How could anything so dry and dusty and shriveled have any connection with her own sheer freshness, the faint emphasis seemed to inquire.)

Mrs. Mercer caught them away from her and brooded them against her flat chest. "Lilies of the valley. You gave 'em—one night."

"Oh, I do remember!" The famous Angel smile came now, luminous and sweet. "And you've kept them, all this time, before my picture, *dear* friend!" The little tender phrases cascaded softly down as she began to glide about the room, gently touching things with an air of benediction. "The dear little house . . . the dear, little, secret, hidden home . . . so peaceful. . . ."

Willow, watching her adoringly, saw her mother's eyes narrow suddenly, her lips straighten themselves

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into a level line, and a faint, opalescent rose seep into the pale cheeks. "Oh, Sister Mercer?"

"What?" The girl, looking at the strange and humble creature, decided that her eyes were exactly like a goggle-eyed gold-fish's. They seemed to be positively starting from her head.

"Would you—*could* you find it in your heart to lend me your little hidden house?"

"*Oh. . .*" It was only a rapturous sigh of assent, incredulous, abashed.

"Just for a day or two—only a day and a night, perhaps! If I might slip away here, all alone, *quite* by myself, for refreshment, for meditation and prayer?"

Mrs. Mercer stood staring at her woodenly as if she could not comprehend the sense of what she was saying, so she began to repeat her words, speaking very slowly and gently. Suddenly the woman dropped to her knees with a little yelp of emotion and buried her face in the skirt of Angela's white linen dress, in her gray cape. Her shoulders moved convulsively, and there was an indistinguishable mumble of broken speech.

The evangelist, putting a hand on the bowed head, looked across to her daughter with a tender and deprecating smile. Willow must understand that it was not her mother this good soul worshiped; it was the salvation for which Mother had been made a blessed channel, that was all.

Willow, with the sting of tears in her eyes, went out of the cabin. It was too sacred a scene for her to share. Only one word had come clearly out of the jumble of dry sobbing,—"*hallowed.*" Poor, bitter, hideous Sister Mercer with the outpopping eyes and

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the dank hair and the dreadful hands, wanted the Angel of Hallelujah Tabernacle to hallow her little hidden home with her presence . . . that silver star in the rough, crowded cabin, where the high-shouldered old pieces of walnut furniture jostled each other and the dead lilies of the valley made a shrine of Angela's picture. . . .

When they walked together back to the car the evangelist was excitedly, girlishly confidential with her daughter.

"This is going to be our precious secret, yours and mine, darling! Some time soon, Mother will slip away here for a little blessed season of solitude and silence, and you will know where she is, but you won't breathe it to a soul! You will just say—'I know where my mother is, but I have promised not to tell. She has gone away for a rest and a renewing of the spirit.' No one must know—not even Grandmother! Sister Mercer will keep the secret, dear faithful soul."

"Mother, Harold will know if he drives you out."

"Ah, but I won't have Harold drive me out, precious! I will make other arrangements. We won't breathe a word about this, going back, for Harold to hear; we won't even express interest in it." They had reached the secret gate, and Willow was manipulating it proudly and capably. Angela turned for another look. "Ah, the peace of that little hidden house! The sweet peace of it!"

The girl stood still and put an eager hand on her mother's arm. "Mother, dearest, won't you let me come with you? You'll need some one to wait on you, or it won't be a real rest! I will bring your breakfast to you, and I won't talk at all!"

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There was a look of something bordering on alarm in the evangelist's face. "*Alone*, Mother said, dear!"

"Oh, but it would be just like being alone, Mother—truly! I promise I won't even speak! I'll just bring your meals and then go outside and stay till you call me. You needn't even call me—I'll just quietly slip in when it's time for meals or to open your bed, and I can sleep on that couch. *You* mustn't have to bring in the wood and the water. Oh, Mother—*let* me!"

"Sometime, darling, yes! Mother promises you faithfully. Sometime you shall come here with me, and we'll have a cozy, happy visit together, just ourselves. But just now, when I'm so very weary, and poor Grandmother has been so worn and nervous with the heavy burdens of the Tabernacle—"

"Please, Mother, *please!*" She was begging childishly, on the verge of tears.

The light went out of Angela's face. She began to speak with sweet frigidity. Couldn't her little girl rejoice unselfishly that Mother had this blessed opportunity without greedily wishing to share it? Was that all she had learned in the Tabernacle, in the Home Temple, from Mother and Grandmother, and dear, good Miss Eaton? Couldn't she be big and generous and— Ah, yes, Mother knew she could, bless her dear heart!

The drive home was thrillingly happy, her mother's slender body resting in the curve of her young arm, their talk, kept well away from Mrs. Mercer's hidden house for Harold's benefit, merrier than she had ever remembered, their silences companionable and understanding.

Chapter XV

MISS EATON'S return to acerbity could not dim the radiance of that remembering,—poor Miss Eaton who was not the sharer of a thrilling secret. Willow's reaction to her sharp fretfulness was only a deepened patience, and she hurried obediently when the companion insisted that they were late in starting for their walk.

"Must we go to Glendon Park again?" she asked in mild protest. "We go there so often, Miss Eaton. Aren't you tired of it?"

"Your grandmother prefers it for you to the crowded streets."

Willow sighed. "Some day, when I'm a few years older, and she realizes that I'm of an age to be trusted, I'll try to make Grandmother understand how I like people. I mean, that I'm sure I would like people if I really saw them and knew them. Miss Eaton, wouldn't it be good for me, wouldn't it be helpful and instructive, to read stories about people?—magazines, novels?"

"What is the sense of reopening that subject? You know perfectly well that your grandmother and your mother have strictly forbidden you to read modern fiction. You are being trained for an evangelist and—"

"Oh, but that's just *why!*" the girl wailed. "Wouldn't it help me to understand human beings?"

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"There's no point in asking me that," said her companion, coldly. "Carry your requests to Mrs. Meeker and your mother." She did not look at her but kept her eyes rigidly ahead as they walked.

Willow did not speak again until they had left the street and turned into the tree-shaded paths. "Miss Eaton, was this park named for that reporter's mother? I remember you asked him if her name had been Glendon."

"For her grandfather, who gave it to the city. The family has always been prominent here; wealth, breeding, culture, social and civic activity."

Her pupil sighed. "But—of the world, I suppose?"

"Well, of a different world from yours." It was a curious answer from her preceptress who, while Willow had never observed in her any evidences of ecstatic religious conviction, had nevertheless always sternly inculcated in the girl the tenets of Hallelujah Tabernacle. Now there was something new and strange in her manner, in her intonation; an interlining of—could it be scorn? And a queer, battened down excitement which burst out in little gusts of impatience and reproof.

Willow was silent again. She did not speak until she discovered Arden Dexter. "Oh, look, Miss Eaton! There he is now!—the reporter!"

"Well," said the governess-companion in an odd, controversial manner, "it's a public park, isn't it?"

Willow regarded her in grieved amazement. "Of course, Miss Eaton. I didn't mean—I was just telling you that I saw him. And I think—" she added after an instant—"he is coming to speak to us."

"So far as I know, that is entirely legal," snapped

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the teacher, her face averted. "Even if he should ask us to sit down and talk with him, there would be no occasion for summoning police protection. He has been admitted to your own home, remember."

Willow did not try to answer or to placate her; she was too thoroughly bewildered. Besides, the young man was approaching them at a swinging stride, pulling off his soft felt hat as he came. (She had not remembered that his hair was so dark and so thick.)

"Good morning! What a lucky chance, Miss Meeker! There are several questions I hadn't time for the other day—has she a few minutes to spare, Miss Eaton?"

"As many as you like," said the woman in a low, choked tone. She seated herself on a bench and the girl sat down beside her, but the boy dropped to the grass and sat cross-legged before them. It had the effect of making him look much younger than he had appeared on the inhospitable chair in the Home Temple.

"First of all, how did you like the interview in the *Standard*?" he addressed himself directly to Willow, and she felt a drastic change in his manner. All the deference, almost all the civility was missing from it, and in its place there was a hard and steely keenness, a teasing impishness which was not merry but cruel.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I did not read it. My mother said it was—very well written."

He stared incredulously. "You didn't read it?" he scoffed. "Yeah, I'll bet you didn't read it!"

"I never read newspapers," she said gently, her color rising. A moment ago she had been so happily excited, so sure that something pleasant was happening—the

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bright encounter with the tired-eyed boy who looked as if one might so easily *like* him—and now she was a little frightened. He was like a person she had never seen before; an unkind alien. “I have never read a newspaper or a novel or a magazine in my life. You see—”

He grinned up at her. “That’s a great line,” he applauded.

“Line?” she puzzled.

“*Your* line! Now, then,” he became brisk, “suppose we come right down to cases, Miss Edwina Willow. The family group put on a very clever skit the other day. It was a wow! But now suppose you come across!”

She turned anxiously to Miss Eaton, but the companion was intently watching a gray squirrel in a tree. “I don’t understand what you mean, and my name—”

“Your name is Edwina Willow. You were named for your father, Ed. Willow, a foreigner who translated a mouthful of crazy syllables into that,—a circus strong man who fell and broke his neck before you were born.” He was watching her narrowly. “Don’t waste any perfectly good breath denying it. You see, I’m wise.”

“I’m sure you are,” she said soothingly—only to keep him from getting more irritated and irrational as newcomers to the Tabernacle were sometimes, having to be tactfully hurried out by ushers. . . .

He leaned forward, his chin outthrust, his clever, truculent young face close to hers. “Hang on and look out for the curves! I’m going to shoot the whole

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works! Wouldn't you like to go back to Deerville and see your twin brothers?"

The Golden Girl's gold and hazel eyes widened and the pupils grew black. She paled swiftly. "Why—" it came with a little gasp—"that's the strangest thing! I used to think that, too, when I was little. It was—years, I guess—before I really understood. I called them my twin baby boy brothers!" The childish words came tumbling headlong out of her memory. "But they weren't, of course. Why didn't you ask my mother or my grandmother? They would have explained it all to you. They belonged to such a nice woman in whose house we boarded, and I was just a baby myself, really, and I adored them and thought they were ours."

"They were yours," said Arden Dexter steadily. "Your mother's children—hers and her husband's. He was an invalid, a retired missionary, named Beriah Turner." He saw her eyes widen and widen until it seemed as if they must spill over and spread a sort of golden quicksilver, which was an absurd idea, but presented itself to him persistently, over her white cheeks. "He lived in a big white house, one of the best in Deerville, and he was well-to-do, and—"

The Lord would provide.

Brother Beriah was a good provider!

Frightened color came flooding into her face. Her heart was beating wildly in her throat. It wasn't true; it couldn't be true, but how it fitted into the pattern of childish memories—those incoherent facts and fancies which had made her mother sad and her grammer—grandmother—angry! It was a cruel trick of some sort, and she would not let it terrify her. Her

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mother could explain it all away. But the pity and disappointment of it—to find the one person who seemed such fine material for liking an unkind tormentor!

“Your twin brothers—step-brothers, of course—are being brought up in Deerville by their aunt, Mrs. Mollie Bascom. Mrs. Bascom, I understand, was a very good friend to you.” He was watching her relentlessly. They had trained her well, but they couldn’t control her circulation, by gad! That was giving her away.

She flushed more warmly at the onrushing recollections. “Oh, she was! She *was*! The kindest woman—I *do* remember her! But you are mistaken about the babies. If you will go to see my grandmother—”

“Snap out of it!” jeered the youth. “Say, listen! You’re pretty poor on history, aren’t you? How about arithmetic? How old are you?”

Willow rose to her feet and threw a distressed glance at Miss Eaton. Why was she continuing to submit her to this incomprehensible rudeness? But the companion kept her face resolutely turned away. The girl drew a steadying breath before she replied. “I don’t think you have any right to talk to me in this way, and there is no reason why I should stay and let you. I will be seventeen next week.”

He threw back his head with a shout of laughter. “You’re a slick job! I’ve got to hand it to you, but I’m on! Did you ever study arithmetic?”

Willow put a shaking hand on her companion’s shoulder. “Miss Eaton, will you come away with me, please?”

The woman turned her face to her, and she saw that

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it was white and strained. "Why don't you answer his question?"

"Of course, I have studied arithmetic." Willow took one step away from the bench, but Miss Eaton did not rise.

Arden Dexter laughed again. "Then perhaps you can make a stab at figuring the difference between nineteen hundred and eight and nineteen hundred and twenty-seven?"

She felt cold and sick and faint; she tried to look away from his probing, angry, relentless eyes with the faint red lines in them but she could not. She wanted her mother; she even wanted her grandmother. Without waiting for Miss Eaton, she started to walk away.

He followed her, getting in front of her, heading her off. "You'll be twenty years old your next birthday," he said. "Twenty, next week. Five and a half years older than your step-brothers." His voice was derisive, inimical. "The little lamb of God has been gamboling longer than she likes to admit!"

Mother Meeker met them at the door. Her florid face was redder than usual, and Willow thought at first she must in some mysterious way have learned of the dreadful scene in the park. She was wheezing painfully, but ignoring her disability as she always did.

"Willow, Miss Eaton," she began at once, "my daughter and I have decided to let you take a little trip. Just a few days, for a little change, with Harold and the car. I have telephoned him, and he'll be here by the time you've packed your suit cases. Just take enough for two or three days, that's all."

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"Where are we to go, Mrs. Meeker?" the companion wanted to know.

"Anywhere you like!" It came in a benevolent gasp. "Take a nice little trip. Look, Miss Eaton,—here's a hundred and fifty dollars! Don't spend it all unless you have to, but spend all you need."

"But, Grandmother—" Willow began.

"See some pretty scenery—Harold can get some maps—and go to a nice little hotel and have a happy time! Of course, Miss Eaton, we can rely on you—no worldly pleasures for our one ewe lamb! Now, run right up and pack and—"

"I want to see Mother," said the girl, determinedly.

"Well, you can't see her, Willow, and that's all there is to it!" She was herding them toward the stairs.

"Why not, Grandmother?"

"Because I say not!" A little breathless flare of temper, quickly controlled. "Because your poor mother is very nervous and very tired, and she has locked herself in her room and doesn't want to see *any* one. That's what she said—nobody! Sent you her love and said if you wanted to please her, you'd do like I told you."

They were on the stairs now, the girl and the companion mounting slowly, Mother Meeker urging them wheezily from behind.

"I shall have to do some telephoning, Mrs. Meeker," Miss Eaton said without emotion. "I had made other plans." She passed the older woman and went down again and closed the door of the little telephone closet behind her.

"Grandmother," Willow pleaded, "couldn't I just look at Mother? Even if I didn't speak?"

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"No, you can't, and I should think you'd be ashamed to tease, when you know what she said for you to do! You go straight and pack, now, and be ready when Harold comes. That's the way for you to show how much you think of your mother, not by disturbing her when she's trying to rest!" They had reached Willow's room, and Mother Meeker opened the door and gave her a push over the threshold. "Now, you mind me, Willow Meeker! You hurry!"

Mechanically, the girl got her suit case from the closet and packed it neatly with underwear and stockings and two extra dresses, and put her night dress and her Bible and her slippers into her small fitted satchel. Her mind felt bruised and stunned; it would not think for her.

Instead of the orderly mental process she tried to summon her thoughts kept whirling like a kaleidoscope, tumbling into many colored fragments of remembering. Deerville; Brother Beriah whose hands were damp (her mother's weeping in the night!); kind Mrs. Mollie Bascom, and another figure, another woman, unkind, sharp where Mrs. Bascom was soft; the twin baby boy brothers—red, wrinkled, enchanting—

But of course he was wrong, the tired-eyed newspaper man—cruelly, viciously, incomprehensibly wrong! Either he had invented it all— But no, for there were scraps of truth here and there in the falseness: some one had told him, poisoned his mind. That other woman, the unkind one— But why did he go to Deerville? And why did he look at her so strangely, at once enjoyingly and—furiously?

"The little lamb of God has gamboled longer—"

She stood still in the middle of the floor, the suit

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case in one hand, the bag in the other. Was it *possible*? Could she be almost twenty years old? A woman, not a child any longer, not even a girl? Watched over, guarded, guided, controlled like—like a *baby*—and twenty next week? But it simply wasn't true. It couldn't be true. It was merely the fantastic imaginings of that newspaper man who hated them so, because they were children of light, and he was a child of this world, and Satan was using him for a cat's-paw to pull down the glory of Hallelujah Tabernacle!

That was the explanation. The forces of evil were always jealous of the forces of good; she knew that perfectly. The Devil was always marshaling his power against God and His angel—*Angel*—the silver star who led the sick and sinning to the well of salvation!

"Willow! Are you most ready?"

"All ready, Grandmother." She stepped out into the hall, and met Mother Meeker who had just come upstairs. Her late moment of heartening meditation had calmed and steadied her, and she had no intention of speaking as she did. It surprised her to hear her voice.

"Grandmother, how old am I?"

"What?" There was a pause; the fraction of a second, and then sharp reproof. "That's a smart question, Willow Meeker! The idea! A great big girl, going to be seventeen her next birthday, wanting to know how old she is! You go right down, now! Harold's here!" She tapped at Miss Eaton's door and went into the room.

The girl started downstairs obediently, and then motivated by a swift and uncontrollable impulse, she

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set down her luggage and ran the length of the hall. She turned the knob of her mother's door very softly. It was locked. She knelt and peeped through the keyhole. Of course, it was a silly thing to do; she couldn't see through the key, but—There was no key in the lock, and in her surprise at that her hand lost its caution and rattled the knob.

"You open that door this minute!" It was her mother's voice, petulant, angry; *enraged*. "I tell you I won't endure such treatment! I won't put up with—"

"Mother!"

But Willow's cry had hardly left her lips when her grandmother was upon her. "Now, then, aren't you ashamed of yourself, Willow Meeker, disturbing your poor, exhausted mother! I declare, for two cents I'd whip you, big as you are! Now you march yourself right downstairs and get into that machine!" She stooped, wheezing, and put her lips to the keyhole. "It's all right, dearie! Just this spoiled, naughty girl of ours, that's all! No, dearie, Mother isn't going to let you get up and go out and work, when you're not fit! You rest, now, or I'll have to get the doctor and give you a sleeping powder! Just you relax, Angie, dear, and don't worry a mite! You've gone beyond your strength, but Mother's going to protect you! You rest to-day, and you can preach and heal to-morrow!"

Confused, abashed, humiliated, Willow went downstairs, her cheeks scarlet, angry tears in her eyes and something very close to hatred in her heart, and Harold, springing up the steps to take her luggage, stumbled in his eagerness and sprawled ludicrously before her.

Chapter XVI

ARDEN DEXTER came out of the interview in Glendon Park hardly less shaken than the girl herself.

Such a lusty scorn and anger throve within him that when she finally wrenched her fascinated and terrified gaze away from the determined holding of his eyes and fled stumbling across the grass, not even waiting for her companion, he had actually started to follow her. He had taken several quick steps before he came to himself. Then he found that he was breathing like a runner, and that his fists were clenched. That was the thing which gave him pause. He stood still, grinning, amused at himself and rather aghast as well. Just what, he made sardonic mental inquiry, had been the big idea? Was he going to catch her and beat her up?

He sat down on the bench and lighted a cigarette with fingers which were not entirely steady as he watched her swift progress over the lawn and down the graveled path until she vanished in the street.

Miss Edna Eaton, hurrying after her charge, had flung him a look which was difficult to analyze. It seemed, incredibly, to mingle triumph with entreaty. "You see?" she gasped as she sped past him. See—what? She was, of course, in the pay of the Tabernacle, and was evidently so complacent over the way her pupil had acquitted herself that she could not forego the expression of exultation. Yet there was another

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emotion in it: the woman appeared to be pleading for something. And why had she urged this pointless second interview, and why had she stood by in silence while the girl was crowded into a corner?

But why, above all, had this whole affair irritated him so? The Golden Girl was merely a little smoother, a little cleverer, a little more of an actress than he had expected, that was all. She was a tawdry sham with her wide open golden eyes with their darkly dilating pupils, her look of candid and trustful innocence, her spurious purity, as they were all shams, but—necessarily—the least reprehensible of the three, for the simple reason that she had had less time in which to be a trickster. Why, then, feel for the mother and grandmother an amused contempt, and for the granddaughter this footless and inconsistent fury? He had interviewed malefactors of every sort and description, —boys on their way to the reform school, second-story men, drug-addicts, prostitutes, murderers on their way to the chair, and for all of them he had felt in greater or less degree a blend of the good citizen's righteous satisfaction and a tolerant and good-natured pity: but for the young creature who had just fled from him across the grass he was animated with a hotter rage than he had ever known before.

He threw his cigarette away and hurried to his machine and drove himself home so recklessly that he was twice reprimanded by traffic officers who were his warm admirers. Just as The Golden Girl had wanted her own people, so he found himself demanding the calm reasonableness of his mother, the brisk and comfortable honesty of Nan Hollister, the orderly mental processes and reactions of The Three Wise Men.

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Mrs. Dexter made his excuses that evening when the three clerics and the visiting nurse came to dinner. "Arden was so sorry, and I was disgusted, but he's off again on that Tabernacle business."

"Well, since he's put his hand to the plow—" Dr. Davidson commented, "and his paper is pretty well committed to this exposé—"

"I know, Jim, but I think the boy is overdoing it. I never knew him to take any assignment so seriously."

"But, my dear lady, is it not a matter of great seriousness?" Rabbi Meyer inquired, eying his favorite entrée with high favor.

"Pulling down a temple—that'll be a job for a strong young man's whole attention," Father McNamara chuckled.

Mrs. Dexter smiled. "Of course, and I want him to see the thing through. I haven't the slightest compunction about it, after my visit with Isabelle Eastwood, and what Nan tells me of the havoc the Tabernacle is making among her settlement people."

"Not all, of course," the girl looked in turn at the priest and the rabbi. "Not the comfortable Catholics or the satisfied Hebrews, naturally, and not a great many of any sort, but those who have—Angel-itis—are awful! Positively, that fasting idiot will have to be forcibly fed if she goes on starving herself to put the food money in the plate."

"Ah, but there's two or three or half a dozen itself of my flock's been running in on the sly," Father McNamara shook his head. "But they're running out again now, b' the same token!"

"And my little Aronson, the tailor, considers himself

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saved," Rabbi Meyer conceded. "And our good friend here, Doktor Davidson, has suffered seriously."

"The whole city, the whole citizenry, suffers from a thing like this," said his hostess. "Anything so tawdry, so compounded of sentimentalities and distortions and cheap emotionalism, to say nothing of preying on the underfed and mentally retarded, taking their nickels and dimes—"

"Dollars!" said the nurse.

"—for the glory of a papier-mâché angel with tinsel wings! That's what makes Arden so fierce toward them, I daresay. He has always had so much detachment toward his interviews—prophets or profiteers or politicians—but these people, especially the girl, make him furious."

"Why the girl?" the nurse wanted to know.

"He interviewed her separately this morning, you know, on the surprising suggestion of her companion, the Eaton woman who came barging in here and insisted on seeing me as well as Arden. That's very curious in itself,—why she should do everything in her power to let him get a genuine interview with this Willow child."

"I don't think she's a child," Nan said. "She's a great big thing!—Well, perhaps the Eaton person is hoping the *Standard* will make it worth her while to inform on the evangelists."

"We thought of that, of course, but then she'd have made terms before turning the girl over to him."

"Turning—what do you mean?"

The clergyman wondered if Mrs. Dexter remarked, as he did, the sharpness in Nan Hollister's eyes and voice.

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"Why, when they met in Glendon Park this morning (the interview supposed to be a complete surprise to the girl) Miss Eaton turned her back, offered no support, and let Arden ask any questions he liked. I'm afraid he was rather brutal about it. I don't enjoy this part of it. I want him to attack the principle, of course, but—" she hesitated. Mrs. Dexter liked life to be civil and decent.

"But, my dear lady, how attack the principle of Hallelujah Tabernacle except through those persons themselves?" the rabbi demanded logically.

"Yes; I know. But he was—for my amiable son—positively savage about that girl—that child—"

"Child? Nearly twenty!" Nan cut in.

"She denied that flatly. She denied and tried to explain all the facts about Deerville and the half-brothers. Arden said she was superb in her acting; only her blushes betrayed her when she was lying."

"Ah, she can still be blushing, then!" said the priest.

The visiting nurse turned to him. "A blush is no longer the sign of innocence, Father McNamara. It's a simple physical reaction, equally indicative of guilt."

"They've evidently trained her marvelously," Mrs. Dexter added. Her thoughts were more upon her harassed son, however.

The clergyman spoke quickly, looking from one to the other of his listeners, trying to gather up all four gazes and take them away from the stark revelation in the nurse's face. "*'A certain damsel . . . which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying. . . .'* I really find both the younger women intensely pathetic. It is the old mother, I maintain, who is the villain of the piece."

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"I'm rather of your opinion, now, Jim." Mrs. Dexter's thin, dark, eager face, so like her son's, was faintly troubled. "I wish I knew just what the companion is trying to do, taking him off to Deerville with them and— Oh, didn't I tell you? Yes; soon after Arden came back from seeing them in the Park, Miss Eaton telephoned mysteriously to say that the Angel had had a nervous breakdown and she and her charge were being sent away for a few days. Would Arden like her to take Willow to Deerville and confront her with the facts there?"

"Well, now, whatever do you make of that?" Father McNamara ejaculated.

"I can't understand it in the least. Of course Arden jumped at the chance; it would make a wonderful story—'The Golden Girl greets her long lost brothers!' In five minutes—I always keep a bag packed and ready for him—he was out of the house. They must be there by this time, and I keep wondering what is happening. . . ."

"It's rather ghastly for the girl in any event," said Dr. Davidson. "It's an acid test of her rôle—a frightful revelation of her family's deceit."

"Yes. I urged Arden to make it as easy for her as possible but he was only grimly amused at my sob-sister stuff as he called it."

"And the lad's right, begging your pardon! Now, Glory be to God—" the priest elected to be merry—"don't be telling him to combine hatred of the sin with love for the sinner! 'Twould be the devil of a dangerous experiment, I'm thinking, the pretty piece she is!" He laughed with roaring heartiness and the others followed according to type.

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Nan Hollister's mirth was interrupted when she almost disappeared under the table after a dropped handkerchief. Dr. Davidson, most punctilious of gentlemen, sat still and let her fish it up for herself.

Arden Dexter, in the same hour, sat with Willow Meeker and her companion in Mrs. Mollie Bascom's front parlor. The tall, tow-headed boy who let them in said his aunt would come in a minute, and then galloped down the hall toward sounds of noisy revelry. There was a loud medley of boys' voices, the clatter of plates and clink of cutlery.

"Must be throwing a party!" the reporter commented, walking over to study an enlarged portrait in crayons. "Look here, Miss Willow! Is this Beriah Turner?"

"Yes," said Willow, faintly. It did not matter in the least whether the solemn atrocity on the wall was meant for the missionary: the only vital question in life was whether that big blond boy and his twin were her step-brothers. On that, all the credulity, all the faith in the world hung.

It had been a dreadful day; a day of dreadful doubts. The interview in Glendon Park, the walk home in frozen silence, the racking moment at her mother's door and the subsequent conclusion that nothing—*nothing* could justify her grandmother in keeping her mother forcibly in her room, even for her own good, and the determination to join forces with Angela and see that it never happened again; the oddly mature, grown-up feeling (*could* she be nearly twenty years old?) that in future she must stand with her mother against her grandmother, the strange and hasty exodus

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in the car; strangest of all, Miss Eaton's dry and colorless suggestion that they go to Deerville.

She had flatly refused. "Miss Eaton, I won't! Why should I? It isn't true; it can't possibly be true. I won't even pretend there's a possibility—" Then the sudden desire to definitely, forever close the hated subject, to be able to face the reporter and refute his charges; her struggle, her final feeling that she was really attesting her confidence by going, by showing her conviction that there was nothing to uncover, to divulge, to fear; Harold's bashful rapture at being entrusted with her, his insistence that she ride in front with him; his whispered, tedious recital of his small early sins, his stealthy hand upon her hand, her arm, her knee. . . . And at the end, Arden Dexter waiting at the town limits of Deerville in his car, trailing them to the hotel, registering just beneath them, sitting near them in the dining room, following them to Mrs. Mollie Bascom's house . . .

Willow's head ached with the sick bewilderment of it all. Miss Eaton, her pallid and expressionless face blanker than ever, was chief among the mysteries. She had not spoken since morning, except to answer questions acidly, and she had made Willow ride in the front seat to be rid of her askings. Now, in the high-ceilinged, shabby, lived-in parlor of Brother Beriah Turner's house, she sat rigidly on the edge of a chair, hands locked in her lap, avoiding the girl's eyes.

A long, lusty young masculine cheer came up the hall to them:

"What's the matter with Aunt Mollie Bascom?

She's all right!

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We'll tell the cock-eyed world
She's all right!
Rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, rah, RAH!—
Aunt—Mollie—Bascom!”

Dishes rattled and crashed; laughter, more cheers; clamor.

Then a swift if heavy step outside the door, and a large woman in it, filling it up, a woman with iron gray hair and a round rosy face. “I’m sorry, folks,” she said, “but I had to keep you waiting! We’ve got the Basket Ball Team to supper, and I was just dishing up the desert! Deerville’s won the county championship, and I baked ’em a cake kind of in the shape of a basket ball and put on the scores in yellow on the white icing—yellow and white’s our colors!” She was rolling down her sleeves, and there was the glisten of perspiration on her forehead and her broad upper lip.

The reporter stepped forward. “I am Arden Dexter. You may have heard of my former visit to Deerville.”

“How’d’o, Mr. Dexter?” She offered a large warm hand. “I should say I did, from Ella Meers. Won’t you sit down?” She looked expectantly at the others.

The youth stepped back and made a brief, dramatic pause. “Mrs. Bascom, I’ve brought an old friend to see you. Some one you haven’t seen for nearly fourteen years, and I’m wondering if you’ll recognize her?” His dark, vivid face was keen with eagerness.

She was as happily and simply excited as a child. “Well, now, let’s see! Fourteen years? That’s a pretty long—” she broke off sharply and looked hard at the girl.

Willow stood still, and it seemed to her as if all the

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breath had left her body. This was Mrs. Mollie Bascom, the good friend of her warm remembering. The past came hurrying back on running feet. This was the house, these were the recollected smells of heartening food. But the twins were hers, Mrs. Mollie Bascom's; they must be; they had to be, if the world were to go on.

The woman gave a smothered cry. "*Goldie!* It's *Goldie!* Woman grown and pretty enough to eat, like I always said you'd be, but I'd 'a known you in ten thousand!" She took her in a deep enfolding, crushing her against a big warm body. "Oh, my dearie dear! I believe I've thought of you every day of my life since you went away! Busy as I've been with my blessed boys—and Lord knows they've kept me on the jump—I never got over missing you!"

Willow's heart gave a glad, triumphant leap. *Her* boys!

"You were the *nicest* young one—kind of pitiful at first—like a little picked pigeon that first night I laid eyes on you—peaked and hungry, and the Lord only knows when you'd been in the hot suds and He won't tell! And not a button on you that wasn't hanging by a thread or clean gone! *Goldie!* I declare, I'm so pleased pink I could sit right down and cry!"

Miss Eaton, on the edge of her chair, her face livid, was twisting her clenched hands, and Arden Dexter ran the tip of his tongue out and wet his lips. Only the big pink woman herself was unaware of the tensity in Brother Beriah's front parlor. She went whole heartedly on with her monologue.

"I wrote and wrote to you, like I promised, but never a line. 'Course, you were too little to write, but

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I did think Angie or Mrs. Meeker might of! By'n by, I just gave up looking for letters, but I says to myself a million times if I did once—'Never you mind! Just you wait!' I says. 'That young one's pure gold all the way through, not just her hair and her skin and her eyes! It's her heart, too, and just let her get her growth and her full senses, and she'll come back to us,' I says." She held her off at arm's length to gloat over her, freeing one hand to wipe away frank tears with the back of it. "Look at me, crying like a baby! But I just can't help it, Goldie, I'm so come over with happiness!" She caught the girl's limp body to her again. "I don't know as I ever really blamed poor little Angie very much—weak, forlorn little thing, she was. It was your grammer managed everything and everybody and I s'pose she does still. I hear they've got a grand big church in the city and everything going on greased wheels. But you came back to see us, Goldie! You came back! Now, just wait till I call Jerry and Bill! I've never told 'em a word nor gave 'em a hint. I just—waited!" She stepped to the door and called: "Bill! Jerry! Hey, *Bill!*" She shook her head. "They can't hear themselves think, there in the dining room. Wait! I'll go get 'em!" She hurried down the hall.

Miss Eaton got up from her perch upon the chair and took a single step toward her charge, and sat down again, averting her face, and the newspaper man walked once more to the crayon portrait of Brother Beriah Turner and gave it his whole attention.

So The Golden Girl stood alone when Mrs. Mollie Bascom came back into the room, followed by two big blond boys. They stood staring at the strangers, and

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one of them had a huge wedge of cake in his hand. They had splendid bodies and their faces wore the aunt's expression of bottomless tolerance and good-humor.

Mrs. Bascom's voice broke a little with the excess of her feeling. "That I've lived to see this day! Goldie, remember what you used to call 'em?—'My twin baby boy brothers!' Well, here they are! And boys, Bill, Jerry, I've never told you, not knowing when it'd come about, but—here's your sister!"

Chapter XVII

THE *Standard* was first in the field with its shrieking head-lines:

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF "ANGEL"

HALLELUJAH TABERNACLE EVANGELIST MISSING FROM
"HOME TEMPLE." "MOTHER MEEKER" MANIFESTS
ALARM AND UNCERTAINTY AS TO HER
DAUGHTER'S WHEREABOUTS

Angela Meeker, well-known evangelist and healer of Hallelujah Tabernacle, is missing from her home. She had been for several days confined in her room, suffering a nervous collapse, according to the statement made by Mrs. Meeker, her mother, to a representative of the *Standard* early this morning.

Members of the "Home Temple" household admitted, under questioning, that there had been considerable friction of late between the famous woman preacher and her mother, one even going so far as to state that the "Angel" had been locked in her room by "Mother Meeker."

At all events, the alleged disappearance of the pastor has been causing much agitation among her flock, and a record attendance at the Tabernacle is expected this evening.

The loyal *Union* brought out an extra in the early afternoon, admitting the absence of Angela Meeker

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and the fact that her mother did not know when and where she had gone, but handling the matter in an assured and comforting manner.

Mrs. Meeker, mother of the great evangelist, talked very frankly with a member of the *Union* staff regarding the rumor of friction between her daughter and herself, a rumor started or at least circulated by certain unscrupulous agencies of this city which have been opposing the fine and helpful work of Hallelujah Tabernacle from the first.

"I can readily see," she said with a weary smile, and the traces of anxious tears, "why certain conditions might have been misunderstood. My dear daughter's health has always been frail, causing me the greatest concern, and of late she has been on the brink of nervous prostration, chiefly on account of the constantly increasing duties connected with Hallelujah Tabernacle, and the amount of healing she has been doing, which always wears her out completely. I said to her one day, I guessed I'd just have to lock her in her room and keep her there if she was ever going to get any rest, and she said well, she guessed I would, and that's exactly what happened.

"What I imagine is that some member of the flock, devoted to her as they all are, misunderstood and didn't realize that I was only protecting my precious child for her own good, and rescued her, and my prayer is that she is in safe, kind hands, and will be returned at once to her loving mother and her little daughter, whose tender heart, I fear, is now torn with anxiety. We sent her off for two or three days' holiday with her faithful companion, and as soon as they hear this report they will fly to the Home Temple on the wings of the wind.

"You can say to the readers of your clean, fine news-

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paper that all statements as to trouble between my beloved daughter and myself are false. I guess I'm impulsive and I speak quickly sometimes, and when I've been anxious about her overdoing I may have sounded sharp, but it was only a mother's heart, fearful for her child!"

Arden Dexter, telephoning back to town, had the news five hours before his return, but the evangelists' car and its passengers had gone on to a village beyond Deerville, and the girl, who never looked at newspapers, was spared at least the initial shock of the big black type.

Harold and Miss Eaton, conferring together, decided not to tell her until they reached home; there was nothing she could do, and she might at least escape eight or nine hours of grief and terror. It made each of them more solicitous of her—Miss Eaton less acid in her replies, Harold waiting on her in an agony of clumsy tenderness.

At one point the companion went into a hotel and telephoned to the Home Temple for news, leaving her charge in the car.

"She said she'd be ten or fifteen minutes," said Harold. "We'll drive around—nothing to see here!" But after three or four minutes, on the edge of the village, he brought the machine to a stop beneath a low-hanging tree.

The girl heard him clear his throat twice before he spoke, and she sighed, because she was very weary of the recital of Harold's small pale sins.

His voice was strained and husky. "Willow, it's in the Scriptures, and what's in the Scriptures is always right, isn't it?"

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"Of course, Harold." (If only he wouldn't talk, when she had such endless hours upon hours of thinking to do!)

"Well, then, listen—I guess it's in a good many places but I know these two, anyway!" He was taking a wallet from his pocket, opening it, drawing out a penciled memoranda, and his thin hands were shaking. "Listen! This is First Peter, Fourteenth Verse—'*Greet ye one another with a kiss of charity.*' And then there's another in Thessalonians, Fifth Chapter—First Thessalonians, it is, Fifth Chapter and Twenty-sixth Verse—'*Greet all the brethren with an holy kiss.*'" His voice ceased suddenly on a sort of squeak, and he waited.

Willow was thankful for the pause. She had not been really listening, and knew only that he had been quoting something from the Bible. "Yes, Harold," she said gently, "that's beautiful," and went back to her frantic thoughts. The twin brothers, Bill and Jerry Turner, were her step-brothers, her mother's sons, and the sons of her mother's second husband, Brother Beriah Turner of the damp hands, who had seemed in her undernourished childhood an even better provider than the Lord. There was no possible doubt about it. It was forever a fact. Even though there were extenuating circumstances, and Mrs. Mollie Bascom's good-humored tolerance found many of them—she came out of her unhappy musings to realize that there was an odd electric quality in Harold's pause, in his silence.

"Well, then," he was saying in a queer, smothered sort of voice, "well, then, can I? Oh, Willow, *can I?*"

"Can you—what, Harold?" She was contrite.

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"I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention. "I'm sorry. What is it you want to do?"

"Kiss you!" He leaned toward her and over her, his pallid face unpleasantly suffused with queer color, and tried to put his arms about her.

"Harold!" she shrank away from him and down into the seat, shielding her face and fending him off with her arms. "No, Harold! You mustn't—"

"It's in the Bible," he panted, "and whatever's in the Bible is right! You know it's right! And you're saved, and I'm saved, so we can't do wrong! And—and it isn't like fellows and girls that are of the world—it isn't like—like petting parties! Listen, Willow—'*a kiss of charity*'—and—'*an holy kiss*!' Let me—let me— Look out!"

She had managed to turn the handle of the door, and now, with its sudden opening, she fell out of the car, backwards, striking an elbow on the running-board. Before he could gather himself, she was on her feet, starting back in the direction from which they had come, brushing off the dust as she ran.

He overtook her in a moment, begging her abjectly to forgive him, to get in—not to tell Miss Eaton, stopping the car and jumping out, and approaching her humbly, his face pallid again and wet with sweat. He was sorry, he was ashamed, he would never do it again. Could she ever forgive him?

Willow knew it was her duty as a Christian to forgive him, and she did not hesitate, but the words did not seem to do away with the sensation of fear and nausea. She got warily into the tonneau and they drove back for the companion who was waiting grimly

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on the curb. "I'm going to sit here, for a change," said the girl.

Miss Eaton assented without comment, and when Willow was not looking she shook her head at the chauffeur, and he knew that the evangelist was still missing. She got into the front seat with him, as if to free herself of the girl's questioning, and Willow rode by herself and in silence, for there was no conversation in the front, all the way back to the city.

Round and round, over and over, back and forth, went her mind, her memories. Her mother, that silver star, had married an old man, and borne him twin sons, and deserted them. Then would come Mrs. Mollie Bascom's warm voice, in the kitchen visit the following morning. "Well, poor Angie—always was kind of weak and die-away; no real backbone to her. It was your grammer managed everything and everybody, Goldie. I never felt like judging Angie. And Beri', poor old Beri', he worshiped the ground she walked on and didn't want the breath of heaven to blow on her. Kind of pitiful, it was, that he couldn't live to lay eyes on his sons. You wouldn't remember, of course, and anyhow, we'd sent you over to Ella Meers' house, but I was reading out of the Bible to him that Song of Songs part that always seemed sort of—well, mushy to me, if I may say so—but Angie read it to him and he was just clean carried away with it—well, I was reading it to him in his room, and the babies were being born, and he'd hear Angie—" she had broken off and looked at the girl's face, cleared her throat, and continued less explicitly. "I never shall forget to my dying day. I was reading it out to him, trying to keep his mind occupied—'*Until the day*

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break and the shadows flee away' (poor old Beri', little did I suspicion he was so close to the shadows!) And then,—*'Many waters cannot quench love'* and *'Make haste, my beloved'*—and we heard one of the twins cry, and I started wheeling him down the hall, and he r'ared right up straight, and pitched forward, and went down onto the floor, and he was gone. I never heard the beat of it in all my born days. The twins borning and he dying; seems like the same door opened—somewhere—to let them out, and him in. . . .”

Round and round, over and over, back and forth, went her mind. Her mother had deserted her newborn infants, those tiny, red, writhing creatures, the twin baby boy brothers whom she remembered as so utterly enthralling and enchanting; walked out and left them forever.

“Well, of course, Goldie, you must remember she was frail always, and after carrying and bearing twins—why, it seemed for a while like she'd just slip away, spite of all we could do! And she felt she had a call to great work, preaching and healing, and you to look after anyway, and what could she do with two great stramming boys? 'Twas my idea in the first place. I suspicioned they'd be a burden, and I was just beside myself to have 'em, and I put it up to 'em, and the property was divided, all fair enough!”

Diffidently, she had broached the matter of age and her good friend, bending down to pull a pan of gingerbread out of the oven, had answered heartily.

“Why, let's see, Goldie! You must 'a' been—five? Six, I guess, when you went away. Well, now, I couldn't take my Bible oath on it, and you were kind

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of a little runt first I knew of you, but you picked up right off and filled out so pretty and plump! Your folks were so taken up with church I had most of the care of you and tickled pink to do it. I kept you outdoors from daylight to dark, almost. Played by yourself as contented as a kitten." She cut a steaming square of gingerbread and poured a glass of golden milk. "There! Don't that carry you back? Don't that seem like old times?" She fairly purred with pleasure, having her there to feed and fondle. "I remember once I went out and found you digging a hole and putting a doll in it, and you spoke up as pert as could be, and says—'I'm Brother Beriah, burying my sainted wife on India's coral strand. Dysentery!' Wasn't that the cutest?"

Kind, *kind* Mrs. Mollie Bascom, still chiefly concerned with getting people warmed and fed, out into the sunshine or tucked up in bed; good-naturedly amused; boundlessly tolerant: "Oh, well, now, I don't know as you could wonder—"

The comfort of her endured for several hours after she had left her, and then the dark army of doubts marshaled again. Where was the serenity of a few months ago, the safety, the peace of last month, last week? The good days of labor in the vineyard, of harmony in the Home Temple, of glorious and sacred triumphs in Hallelujah Tabernacle? The thought of the church brought the remembrance of Arden Dexter's cruel and wanton charges, meeting her as she came away from the Turner house and started back to the hotel where Miss Eaton and Harold were waiting. Briskly, breezily, in that dreadful way of the world in which he lived and moved and had his being,

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he had asserted that the healings in the Tabernacle were not all genuine. She had combated it with zeal and fervor, but he had grinned that impish, tormenting grin which made light of her words, made little of her truth.

"Unluckily for you, Miss Willow, I happen to have the dope on one particular case. My mother had a maid, a husky Swede who came when you called her Huldah, a great, lumbering ox of a thing whose only virtue was enormous strength. She could move pianos. Our house man was sick, so my mother kept her on. Shortly after she left our service we saw her at Hallelujah Tabernacle, at a healing meeting, on crutches. No, she had never been lame, and she'd never had rheumatism—I tell you she was strong as a gorilla! Well, she was healed by your mother, and walked out, without the crutches and without a limp."

"You don't know what had happened to her since she had left your service," Willow had insisted.

"In three or four days? Well, I went to see her next day at her new place. 'How are you, Huldah?' I said. 'Oh, ay'm wall, t'ank you,' she answered. 'Haven't been sick lately? Haven't felt bad in any way?' She insisted on a clean bill of health, and then I put it to her straight from the shoulder: why had I seen her on crutches at Hallelujah Tabernacle? She tried to bluff for a moment, but when she saw I had the wood on her she came across. 'Val, Mester Arden, how can a poor voman pass up a shance to get twanty dollar so easy like dat?' "

She did not believe him. She could not believe him. She told him it was not the truth, and when he started to argue, she said steadily—"Why should I even try

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to believe you? You are cruel and unkind. You hate me, and my mother, and the Tabernacle, and our holy work. Satan has bound you. If you will repent, even you can be saved. Not all the wickedness you have done—”

“Hey!” he stopped her. “I haven’t done any wickedness! I’m a perfectly nice person! You ask my mother!” The grin. “Ask the community. As a matter of fact, I’m a rather exceptionally fine young fellow with a brilliant future, and practically no past!”

“You are a child of this world,” she had told him, sorrowfully. “But there is redemption, even for such as you, if you will be washed clean in the blood of the Lamb!”

He had gone away, grinning, triumphant in his wicked fabrication, and Willow had been sustained by a tingle and glow of righteous wrath. But that had passed soon, or at least had lost its potency, and she was in the depths again.

Flash-backs to childhood: she mustn’t talk about Deerville and the twins because it made her mother sad and her grandmother angry. She was a little lamb of God; she was a child of light. Then the day in which she had left the fold and played with the children of this world and the swift and terrible retribution which had come upon her. Spotted from the world: her grandmother’s sternness, her mother’s vague, faintly remorseful tenderness: the day on which she had staggered to the door and read the sign which proclaimed to the world her depravity:

MEASLES

She remembered, likewise, seeing a sign like that

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upon a house at a much later date, and asking about it and being told, and battling a feeling of resentment for a time, in the memory of that small young agony. But she had come to see, presently, that it had been done for her own good; to impress upon her the results of disobedience, of running after the flesh-pots. She came to regard it as a necessary lesson, as necessary as her grandmother's harsh punishments. Her harsh grandmother: good, hard-working, unsparing of herself as of others, fiercely devoted to the Lord's work, judging the end to justify the means; daring to lock her mother—Angela Meeker—the Angel of Hallelujah Tabernacle—in her room like a bad child.

Rage rose and throve within her against her grandmother. It was that red-faced, wheezing, inexorable woman who had been responsible for all that was wrong, who had retarded much that was right. Love and loyalty for her mother welled up in her, and love and loyalty and a chivalrous, protecting pity became a program in her mind.

She broke the silence of hours by asking Harold to drive faster. She was eager to get back, to march upon her grandmother in the Home Temple and say—"Grandmother, I know how old I am, and I know about my step-brothers. I'm not a child any longer. I'm twenty years old, and I'm going to stand by my mother. Never again will you make her do a thing she doesn't want to do. We will stand together, my mother and I, and there shall be no more deceiving."

After that gallant determination she relaxed and even felt a soft drowsiness coming over her, so that she leaned back in the cushioned seat and closed her eyes.

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It did not seem very long, then, until they were turning into their own street, stopping before their own house. One of the Tabernacle Workers, whose labor in His vineyard took the form of cooking for the evangelists, came running out at the sound of the car. Her eyes were red and swollen, and she shook her head at Miss Eaton.

They had to tell her, then. Her mother had disappeared; her mother was gone; her mother was missing.

Chapter XVIII

"We will go out in the highways and the hedges,
We will sing and pray, every night and day,
Till poor sinners leave their sins and follow Jesus,
And be ready when the train comes in!'"

"When the train comes in, the train comes in,
We'll be ready when the train comes in;
Up to Glory-land 'twill bear our band,
We'll be ready when the train comes in!"

SO sang the faithful that evening at Hallelujah Tabernacle, missing the rich tenor of Clyde B. Armitage, but capably led by Miss Hammer, with Mother Meeker wheezing lustily by her side.

There was an exuberance and a vehemence of worship in Mother Meeker, in Hallelujah Mary, even in the drab and repressed Sister Mercer. They were proclaiming and insisting to the world that Angela, their Angel, was safe, was protected, was kept in all her ways. Now and then a weaker and less confident believer wiped away a tear, sighed gustily, choked back a sob, but for the most part they followed bravely where their leaders led.

Arden Dexter was there, sitting between his mother and Nan Hollister. They had arrived early and secured excellent seats in the middle of the auditorium, halfway down to the pulpit, but hundreds were turned away.

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"Going to be a great show," said the youth. "Shame the Three Wise Men are missing it!"

"Yes. But one quite sees why they couldn't come," his mother answered. "To go once or twice to hear a famous evangelist when everything was running sedately and in order on the surface, at least, is one thing; to come now, with this mob, out of frankly scandalous curiosity—"

"As we do," the girl interpolated.

"Exactly! As we do—would be hardly in the picture for the clerics. But they will be waiting for us at home." She looked about her long and interestedly. "My dear," she whispered, "do look! Did you ever see such faces?"

"Did I?" The visiting nurse was grim. "Don't I wash 'em and feed 'em, and earnestly long to slap them when they do a Mad Scene over this sort of thing?"

Arden shot them a warning glance. He had been emphatic, driving down, on the wisdom of entirely discreet behavior. "It's not only in the Book of Etiquette, but some believer might easily stick a knife in a scoffer!"

Nan had nodded. "I know two or three of my nuts who would!"

Arden had come racing back from Deerville in a state of more nearly hysterical excitement than Mrs. Dexter would have believed possible. It was not only youth's satisfaction in being right in a surmise, and not only the reportorial exuberance over a good story, a scoop: there was an absolutely Inquisitorial spirit in his elation over Willow Meeker's discomfort and vanquishment.

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"Didn't I tell you I would? Didn't I say I'd rub the gilding off the Golden Girl and make the Willow weep?"

He had found his mother in her own room, and after casting himself wearily on the couch for three minutes had jumped up again and paced about nervously, picking up books and paper knives and little things on the dressing table, looking at them absorbedly for an instant and putting them down again, absently. "And when you get her cornered, and there's no place to run, she just opens the well and favorably known golden eyes wider and wider—and *wider*—till you swear they're going to spill over on her face, and gives you a dying duck baby stare! But that Eaton woman has me guessing. It must be she's soured on the whole outfit and willing to sell 'em out for nothing." But always he went back to the girl. "You know, she claims she's never read a secular book or magazine, never danced, never been to a theater, never seen a movie!"

"But perhaps she hasn't, Ardie! With their ideas—"

"Yeah. It may be true, at that. The old gal might be just canny enough to keep her sealed up alive, so she could pull a marvelous line. But believe me, she's wise, that little lamb of God! Little lamb! Little fox! If she's innocent, then I can make a watch. Soft as cream; smooth as silk! And gee, Muz," he had halted near her chair, his thin, dark face flushing hotly, "gee, but she's a pip to look at! Gad, isn't it a crime to have a face like that and not be a regular?"

Mrs. Dexter assented cordially and wanted to know his theory of the disappearance.

"Well, of course, we think—the paper thinks—that

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the Angel has taken a little flight with the Boy Friend, but we've got to be careful. 'Alleged' is our middle name, from now on. I think they quarreled, the two women, and Angie threatened something like this, and the old woman locked her up. She got word to Armitage who came with a ladder and did a midnight Romeo and Lochinvar effect. Then, I figure, Mother Meeker blew up: if she hadn't lost her head completely she'd never have spilled the beans. And Angela must have been pretty mad at her mother to pull a stunt like this and nearly wreck the whole works—and likewise pretty well bowled over by this bird who doesn't register at all except when he's singing."

"What did some one say—George Eliot, wasn't it?—about tenors? That when Nature gave a man a fine tenor voice she rarely gave him anything else."

"Armitage is missing, too, you know. I telephoned his house, and Mrs. A. came across promptly and tearfully. I'm to interview her in the morning. Gee, but I'm tired," the boy had concluded suddenly, pitching onto the couch again and crooking his arm across his eyes.

His mother gave him tea and hoped heartily that he would soon be done with the unsavory mess, but now, sitting beside him in the Tabernacle, she felt the fascination, the tug of it,—Mother Meeker, red, breathless, manifesting false cheer and confidence with stark fear in her eyes, Hallelujah Mary in her sedate Tabernacle Worker's uniform, loud, vulgar, vociferous, the ranks of the faithful, anxious-eyed but truculent in their determined faith that all was well with their Angel. "You know, Nan," she whispered, "they're really having a frightfully good time over this!"

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"Of course they are. Peps up existence for them."

"Dramatizes their drab lives. What somebody calls 'the romantic escape.'" She looked about her for a while in silence. "Do you see the woman coming up the aisle? She was on the pulpit with a message not long ago, speaking to Mother Meeker. Her face is the most amazing of all. Look, Arden! There,—she's sitting down across from us—a row down. Look at that expression!"

The woman in the Tabernacle Worker's uniform, slipping into her seat and folding her hands on her bony knees, was Sister Mercer. She tipped her head back and stared raptly at the distant ceiling, and her eyes were fathomless in their exaltation.

"Yeah. That's the real stuff," the boy admitted.

"But that's what addles their silly pates," the nurse objected. "She's exactly the type that decides to put the rent in the contribution plate."

Mrs. Dexter studied her closely while the choir sang and the congregation sang, while Mother Meeker wheezed notices of meetings and services. "I don't know, Ardie," she shook her head.

"Don't know what?"

"Whether, after all, the *Standard's* right in pulling this temple down about her ears, even if it is only cardboard. She thinks it's jasper and jade and lapis lazuli. You can see that this world has given her nothing—"

"Except a bad liver and bunion joints," the visiting nurse commented, after a glance of a practiced eye. "Certainly sunk, isn't she?"

"Good heavens! There's Isabel Eastwood!" Mrs. Dexter leaned forward, staring.

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A slender woman in deep mourning, in early middle age, was mounting the platform, Mother Meeker reaching down a welcoming hand, Hallelujah Mary giving a cordial push from the rear.

"Now, then," said the evangelist's mother, "here's our dear kind generous friend, Mrs. Eastwood, that we have to thank from full hearts for our glorious organ, and she wants to say a word to us! Quiet, now, dear sisters, dear brothers, while Mrs. Eastwood gives us her message of faith and hope!"

"I can't endure it!" Mrs. Dexter almost rose from her seat. "To see a friend, one of our own, making a spectacle of herself—"

"Steady, Muz! Sit tight!" Her son put a hand on her arm.

The woman in black walked to the pulpit, swaying a little, Mother Meeker puffing beside her. "Oh, I feel so unworthy to stand here," she began in a small, smothered voice. "To seem to stand, even for an instant, no matter how humbly, in the place where our Angel has stood to smile down at us with her holy, healing comfort!" The little sentence ran smoothly and swiftly; she had evidently memorized it. Then she began to tremble violently, and to run down jerkily. "She is not with us—but in spirit—we—we must have faith—faith she gave us—God will protect—God—oh, my God!" She finished on a thin wail and broke into weeping.

"Idiot," hissed Mrs. Dexter softly between her teeth.

"Sh . . . careful, Muz," Arden warned.

"Don't weep, dear Sister, dear, kind, generous friend!" Mother Meeker urged, putting a comforting arm about her.

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Hallelujah Mary swarmed up on the platform and patted her briskly on the shoulder.

"That creature—*touching*—Isabel Eastwood," Mrs. Dexter said under her breath.

"Nix on the Niagara!" the saved sinner shouted, and some one in the congregation gave an hysterical giggle.

Mrs. John Walker Eastwood took her white, thin hands away from her pale face and looked down at the throng with streaming eyes. "I can't bear it! I can't *bear* it! She gave me the only comfort I have ever known—the only faith that ever upheld me—"

"That's one in the eye for Uncle Jim!" Arden grinned.

"—and now she's gone from us—God knows where—in danger—suffering—" She gave way completely, crumpled into the prostitute's arms, sobbing bitterly.

The effect of it ran like wildfire through the packed auditorium. Women began to cry, men to groan. "Oh, Lord, save us!"—"My God, my God, hast Thou forsaken us?"—a confused mumble of moaning and supplication. Some got to their feet and surged toward the platform, filling the aisles; Mother Meeker made frightened, futile efforts to calm and control them.

"Now, sistren, now brethren, our Angel wouldn't want—Let us kneel in humble, trusting prayer—Let us join in a hymn—"

"Gad, it looks like a riot," Arden Dexter looked about him grimly.

"Had we better get out, Ardie?" His mother looked at the people in the row in front, swaying and mouthing, with frank distaste.

"Had we better? Not a chance! Stay where you are! Keep out of the aisles!"

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"I wouldn't have missed this for a mint!" Nan Hollister exulted. "Look at your type now, Mrs. Dexter!"

Sister Mercer had not moved. She sat utterly still, as she had sat since coming back from the platform, her snuff-colored hands with the swollen purple veins clasped together and resting on her sharp knees, her head still tipped back, her eyes closed, her lips moving inaudibly.

"There's faith for you!" Mrs. Dexter leaned past an obscuring form.

"She'll probably throw a fit in a minute," the nurse prognosticated. "Look at the veins on her forehead!"

"Hi, there, back up!" Hallelujah Mary bellowed. "What da ya' think this is? A bargain sale! Sit down! Down in front! Watch your step! Say, you give the Lord an awful pain, doin' a Subway scene like this! Sit down, you big stiffs! Want me to come down there and knock your blocks off! Sit—*down!*"

A few laughed; more wept; here and there a woman turned faint and had to be held up. One aged man went down in the aisle and there was a mad moment of panic before he was picked up. Suddenly a more definite excitement began to manifest itself at the top of the center aisle near the main door. Some one was trying to fight a way through the tightly packed throng.

"Police, maybe," Arden thought.

But some one called out in a piercing tone, high above the clamor and babble—"It's Willow! It's the Golden Girl! Make way, there! Let her through!"

The compact knot of bodies swelled and swelled; the cry was taken up all over the building. "The

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Golden Girl! The Golden Girl! Glory be to God!
Hallelujah! The Golden Girl!"

The knot broke, and out of it came the evangelist's daughter, forging through the mass of worshipers. No golden, glistening robes this time; only the tan-colored jersey dress, the little tan felt hat. People clutched at her, cried out to her—

"Where is she? Tell us? Oh, thank God! God be praised! Where is she, lamb of God? Is she safe?"

The little soft dress was twisted and torn; the small hat came off and the shining masses of hair, bronze, coppery, golden, came down in a bright torrent. A long, warm strand of it fell across Arden Dexter's sleeve as she was carried by them, caught in a button, so that she halted with a cry, looking back impatiently, imploringly.

Grimly, with Nan Hollister's help, he disentangled it. He did not look up, but the visiting nurse gave her a long, searching scrutiny. "There!" she said sharply, flinging the waving gold away from her.

"Heavens, she's gorgeous!" Mrs. Dexter murmured.

"Listen! Sh . . . listen!" the youth was peremptory.

Hallelujah Mary, sighting her from afar, came to the rescue. Capably, with the aid of ushers, of Harold, who was close behind, she cleared a path for her to the pulpit.

Mother Meeker met her, coming with her short-gearred trot and enveloped her in a hug. "Say something!" she commanded. "Quick! Get them quiet! Make them sit down! Say something—*anything!*"

Willow Meeker walked to the edge of the platform and held up her hand, and the tumult lessened per-

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ceptibly at once. The calmer ones sat down and pushed the rest into their seats. The girl began to speak.

"My mother is safe! My mother is safe and well and happy!"

There were cries of joy, cheers, hysterical sobbing. The Golden Girl stood waiting, very pale, but smiling down a serene reassurance on them.

"Praise God!" "Thank the dear Lord!" "Glory, glory Hallelujah!" "Praise His holy name!" cried the faithful, and Mary Hallelujah, beating on the tambourine, which expressed her fervor in emotional moments, shouted—"You said a mouthful that time, lambie! You sure said a mouthful, God love you!"

Mrs. John Walker Eastwood came swaying toward her, white, thin hands outstretched. "Oh, my dear, my dear! Tell us!"

Willow shook her head. "I can't tell you where she is, because I promised not to. It's a secret between us. She has gone away alone for a little season of rest, of solitude, of prayer and meditation. I knew she was going, soon, but I've been away, you see, and that's why no one knew, and my grandmother was frightened." She spoke rapidly, in unstudied phrases, eager, awkward in her haste to comfort them. "You mustn't grieve or be anxious; she wouldn't want that! She has gone away for your sakes, to rest, to grow stronger, to refresh her soul. She will come back to you—soon!"

It was with an actual effort that Mrs. Dexter took her eyes away from the girl's radiant and astonishing beauty, to look at the woman across the aisle. She had not moved in all the excitement. Her head was

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still tipped back, her eyes still closed, her dreadful hands with their dark veins and their startlingly white nails still clutched together in her lap.

The choir started to sing, Miss Hammer stepping forward, a beaming smile on her plain face. "Listen!" she commanded, raising her little baton. "Three lines of the verse, and then wait and listen to me, and then repeat what I sing!"

Willow stood back, between her grandmother and Mrs. Eastwood, and the congregation followed their leaders into a rousing rush of tune:

"We will go out in the highways and the hedges,
We will sing and pray, every night and day,
Till poor sinners leave their sins and follow Jesus."

The volume of sound died away and Miss Hammer's voice rose in exultant solo:

"We'll be ready when Angel comes in!"

They caught it up with a joyful roar. It was like the rushing of mighty waters.

"When Angel comes in, when Angel comes in,
We'll be ready when Angel comes in!"

Miss Hammer hadn't had time or inspiration to tinker with the next line, but they surged on, and great billows of sound rocked the auditorium:

"Up to Glory-land 'twill bear our band,—
We'll be ready when Angel comes in!"

The Golden Girl was twisting up her shimmering hair, still smiling down on them.

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"Come on!" said Arden Dexter. "Let's go! I'm sick of this mess!"

"But, Arden—it won't last much longer—" his mother protested. "I do hate missing a minute of it! And that girl fascinates me!"

"I'm fed up!" her son said, hotly. "If you'd had as much of it as I have! I'm sick of the whole works. Let's get out! Come on—we'll beat it before the crowd starts!"

Mrs. Dexter and the nurse followed him reluctantly. They were halted at an intersection for a moment, under a bright light.

"Wait a minute!" Nan Hollister bent her head over his sleeve and lifted a long bronze hair disdainfully between thumb and finger and threw it away, but a current of air caught it and wafted it back again, and she tried to pick it up, and missed it.

The voice of the Golden Girl followed them. She was beginning to pray:

"Dear Father, we thank Thee for all the love and loyalty, all the faith and trust—"

"Take it *off*!" said the reporter, almost, his mother reflected in alarm, with a snarl. The boy was worn to a jangle of nerves with this tawdry business.

Chapter XIX

THE *Standard*, using "alleged" as its "King's X," ran the story of Willow's dramatic entrance next day side by side with a sensational interview with Mrs. Clyde B. Armitage, and carried a short, stinging editorial as well.

Was it not an odd and a most unfortunate coincidence, the editor wanted to know, that Angela Meeker, famous evangelist, "Angel" of Hallelujah Tabernacle, had chosen the very time to "slip quietly away for a little season of solitude, of meditation and prayer," as her daughter expressed it (slipping down a ladder by midnight to manage it), when the leading tenor of the Tabernacle was absent from his home without explanation?

This action, following upon the alleged inharmony in the "Home Temple" between the well-known woman preacher and her mother, the violent quarrels alleged to have recently taken place there, and the statement said to have been made by a member of the "Home Temple" household that "Mother Meeker" had locked the evangelist in her room, gave rise, naturally, to a question and a surmise in the public mind which the Meeker Family would find it very difficult to answer.

In the interview with the wife of the handsome singer, tears mingled freely with ink; Mrs. Clyde B. Armitage was sobbingly sorry for herself; she didn't

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want to misjudge any one, and she wasn't mentioning any names—*yet*, but if she did decide to bring suit for divorce and likewise for alienation of her husband's affections there would be shocked surprise in some exalted places she might mention.

The *Union* was on the street at four in the afternoon, disputing and denying with more zeal than conviction, and at seven in the evening Willow Meeker, accompanied by Miss Eaton, but leaving her in the hall, went to find Sister Mercer in one of the Bible Study rooms where she was performing her labor in His vineyard by way of janitor work.

"Dear Sister Mercer," the girl ran to her and spoke in an eager whisper, "you must go to your little hidden house and tell my mother to come home! Tell her my grandmother is very angry and very anxious, and says there are terrible things in the *Standard*. Only—please don't frighten her or make her unhappy!"

Mrs. Mercer, on her knees with a dust pan and brush, shook her head violently.

"Perhaps you need not say anything about the newspaper, unless it is necessary,—unless she doesn't want to come. Tell her about last night, and how frightened the congregation was, and that Grandmother is almost beside herself, though I have told her that I know where my mother is, and that she is safe and happy, in meditation and prayer."

The woman lifted her face. "*Hate to!*"

"Oh, of course you do! I can understand! You know how she is resting and growing strong and steady again, and you can't bear to disturb her, but you must! You must, truly, dear Sister Mercer! My mother will be grateful to you when she understands." She put a

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shy hand on the bent shoulder. "I know what it meant to you to have her use your dear little hidden home for a refuge! But we'll keep the secret, and she'll go again!"

That seemed to cheer Mrs. Mercer. She told the girl, in her jerky scraps of sentences, never using two syllables where one would answer, that the Angel had whispered to her, one evening, that she wanted to fly to the house in the hills, and told her to give her the key, and not to come near it, please, until she came home again. She smiled away all urgent offers of service. She would take food with her, the little she needed, and would wait on herself—that would be the blessed peace of it. Mrs. Mercer had begged to be allowed to go, just to fetch wood and water, to sleep on the mat outside the door, like a watchdog, but the evangelist had been firm in her sweet refusal. But she *had* gone, nevertheless, the first night; she had disobeyed in so far as to creep along the path until she saw the gleam of lamplight in the window: then she had crept back again.

Her face, during the bald and difficult recital, had shone with a pathetic inner radiance. Never, the girl thought, had her mother given greater happiness: "hallowed," that was what the little cabin with the crowding, high-shouldered walnut furniture had become for Sister Mercer by her presence. They discussed the method of getting there; it would not do to send Harold: Harold, Willow felt, was not an entirely dependable, at least understandable, person of late. Sister Mercer eagerly explained: she went out in the stage, always, and got off at the Sunset Hill road, and walked up;—it was not a bad walk, if you stopped

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often to get your breath. She would start at once, as soon as she had dusted the room, but Willow gently took the implements of her toil away and begged her to go immediately: she would dust the Bible Study room herself, she said, forgetting the companion, waiting in the hall. . . . Surely, surely her mother wouldn't be annoyed with her. But even if she should be annoyed, and hurt, and grieved, it was right; it must be.

There was a jubilee at Hallelujah Tabernacle next evening over the safe return of the evangelist. The faithful could see for themselves that she was safe and well and happy, just as The Golden Girl had promised that she would be. Indeed, she was happier, at least, more starry-eyed, more radiant, than they had ever seen her. Only that she was tenderly grieved for their grief, unhappy in the knowledge of their unhappiness. It was exactly, she smiled down at them mistily, as her dear little daughter had said: they had shared a sweet secret of a little sanctuary where she would slip away for rest and spiritual refreshment. She—Angela—had been in her room in a state, almost, of nervous collapse when dear little daughter and dear Miss Eaton, the faithful companion, had gone away for a little country outing, and she had not known of their absence when, helped by a faithful member of her flock, she had eluded dear Mother Meeker's devoted vigilance (they knew what dear, good mothers were like, where their daughters were concerned—never believed they were really grown up, did they?) and slipped away. She had never dreamed that there would be anxious hearts. She had thought, of course, that little daughter would say to grandmother, "Grandmother, dear, I know where

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Mother is!" And so she would have, of course, only—she wasn't there to say it! She was tenderly, merrily, almost roguishly explanatory. So, now, it was all explained, and all the worry was over and done with, and they were all together again under the blessed roof of Hallelujah Tabernacle, and hadn't they better all kneel down with thankful hearts while she told the dear Lord all about it?

Arden Dexter, watching from a seat near the front, thought he had never seen her so "sheer," her robes so "glistening."

"Jesus, dear! Jesus *de-urr* . . ."

Behind her sat Willow, golden and shining. "All the scenery," the youth told himself with a curling lip, little dreaming how earnestly the girl had begged to wear her jersey dress, with what boldness she had urged that they all forego the costumes, yielding only to the double insistence of mother and grandmother. Program stuff! "Little daughter"—"my little girl"—Twenty years old by the calendar and eighty in guile and trickery, in holy sham and sanctimonious mockery!

There was a low moan behind him, and he turned to see a pallid young woman in a Tabernacle Worker's uniform sliding limply down in her seat. There was a rustle of turning, a murmur of comment, and Mother Meeker's sharp voice, following her sharp eyes, giving out a hymn of praise. The congregation rose and three ushers closed in upon the now unconscious form.

"Take her up to be healed!" Arden Dexter said clearly and distinctly.

"Sh . . . brother, it's all right," soothed one of the men. "She's just fainted. The fresh air—" They were picking her up, clumsily but capably.

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"Well, suppose she *has* just fainted!" the youth demanded. "Why not take her up to the pulpit and let the Angel bring her to?" He was deliberately speaking so that others close by could hear him. "If she can cure deafness and lameness, can't she bring her out of a simple faint?"

In spite of the vociferous singing, people were turning and twisting to listen to his purposely loud voice, to watch the commotion.

"Brother," an usher expostulated, "you mustn't be alarmed! It's only a faint—the fresh air will revive her! Just let us carry her out!"

But young Dexter persisted. "Oh, I see! Your orders are never to drag any genuine cases up to the altar! My mistake! Now I get you perfectly!"

They closed in about him, smothering his words as best they could, one group carrying the unconscious woman out, another hustling him up a side aisle. Arden laughed aloud as he went, partly at the sardonic humor of the thing, partly at the exultant thought of the story he would feature in the morning *Standard*, and most of all at Willow Meeker's shocked face on the platform, unable to hear his words because of the hymn that rolled between them, but aware that he was seeking to pull the Tabernacle down about their ears.

Out in the air, shaking off the soothing words of sistren and the calming hands of brethren, he walked quickly round the corner, stopped under a light, lit a cigarette, pulled out pencil and pad and began to write with furious speed.

"It's a knock-out!" he exulted to himself. "Gad, it's a world-beater!"

A side door in the Tabernacle opened and Willow

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Meeker came out, closely followed by Harold, and the reporter slipped back into the shadows and listened shamelessly.

"I'm going home alone, Harold," he heard the girl say. "There are taxis in front. *Please* go back to the service."

"Let me drive you!"

"Please, no, Harold! I—I want to be alone."

"You want to get rid of me!" He was almost whimpering. "I know! But first—" he plunged toward her and caught her in a clumsy, desperate embrace—"Oh, Willow! It's in First Thessalonians and First Peter—" He bent his head for an instant; then he let her go so suddenly that she swayed and almost fell, while he rushed back into the building, banging the door behind him.

Arden Dexter stepped forward, pulling off his cap and speaking briskly. "Good evening! Especially good, I should say. Got one for me, too?"

Willow had covered her face with her hands but she drew them down at sound of his voice. "Oh—*You!*"

He nodded. "Just in time to see a little Hallelujah loving! Rather a public place to pull a gospel petting party, but I daresay ecclesiastical necking goes, even in the shadow of the sanctuary!"

She was looking at him and listening to him but she was clearly not taking in the sense of his jibes. "I am glad you are here," she said quietly. "I wanted to see you. I wanted to tell you that you were right and I was wrong. I *am* almost twenty years old. I told you a lie, but I want you to believe that I thought I was telling the truth."

"Oh, you want me to believe that you thought you

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were telling the truth?" he mocked. "Why, that's perfectly simple. Anything to oblige. Service is our motto! Any other little thing I can do?"

"Yes, please," she said gently. "You can stop hating us and persecuting us and our holy work. I was wrong about my age, and about my step-brothers; I have admitted that to you. I don't understand why I was deceived about those things, but I must believe that it was for some wise purpose."

"Yeah,—wise is the word!" the youth cut in.

"But to-morrow I shall know all about it, because I mean to tell my mother and my grandmother what I know, and ask them to explain why I was not told the facts before."

"Oh, you do, do you?" He came close to her, grinning derisively.

"Yes." There was a curious expression on her face as she looked at him; she seemed hurt, wistful, bewildered; persistently friendly. "I wonder why you hate us so? I'm sorry. The first time you came to the Tabernacle I noticed you, and I thought you looked gay and kind, and I wished I might know you. I was sure I would like you if I knew you. I have always had so many people to love, but not just—*friends*, you know—to *like*! And it's been—lonely."

Out of the halting, awkward little speech he picked one phrase and held it up to scorn.

"You've had so many to love! I'll say you have! Had one just now, didn't you?—The gospel sweetie! And you're lonely, are you? Well, you needn't be—not a minute longer!" He flung away his cigarette and swooped, catching her more handily than the Taber-

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nacle boy had done. She fought desperately, but he held her hard. "What's the matter? Isn't this what you meant? Didn't you kiss the Apostle just now? Well, then—" at her vehement gasp of negation—"didn't he kiss you? What's the difference? I'm going to kiss you, too! What was the password—First Caledonians? . . . Why the battle scene? Is it a rule of the sanctuary—no necking except with the redeemed, washed whiter than snow? Has the Angel written a new commandment—'*Thou shalt not commit Deuteronomy?*'"

The impish mockery went out of his voice and left a hard rage in its place. "Don't think you can put anything over on me!" He kissed her roughly. "You needn't pull the baby stare! I know what you are because I know what your mother is! Yes, and so do you!" He kissed her again. "You know where she was, and who she was with, and what for! Don't you? *Don't you?* Then I'll tell you!" At his second sentence she swayed in his grasp and he gave her a sharp shake. "Nix on the fainting! The Angel doesn't bother with any small-time stuff like fainting. Cut it, I say! There—" he propped her against the building—"lean on the sanctuary! You're not fooling me, not for a minute! I know your mother and your grandmother, so I know you! The apple never falls very far from the tree!"

Long after he was gone out of sight and sound, she still stood there, putting her hands at each side of her against the rough plaster wall to steady herself. She—Willow, the Golden Girl, the laborer in His Vineyard, the pledged and promised to the holy work of the

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Tabernacle, was besmirched and befouled. A memory of her childhood, a sense of sick horror, shook her like a chill. Once more—and forever—was she, once a little lamb of God, once a child of light—spotted from the world. . . .

Book Three

Chapter XX

THEY explained to her about the misunderstanding as to her exact age; they explained the reasons for keeping from her the fact of the twin step-brothers; they explained the seeming deception of Huldah's false cure.

Sitting in the evangelist's lovely room, with the morning sunshine pouring in, they explained fluently and logically and convincingly, and the load lifted slowly from off Willow's heart, and the tight bands of steel which had seemed to be compressing her brain to the bursting point began to loosen.

Angela was in bed, her delicate breakfast tray beside her, propped up against her pillows, and Mother Meeker sat close by, and the girl sat on a low stool and held her mother's hand. Instead of scolding and snubbing her as she had expected, instead of weeping and being wounded, as she had feared, they treated her beautifully, with a new respect and confidence which made her glad and proud.

"You see, Mother dear," Angela said with silvery sweetness, "our baby girl is gone, and our little girl is gone, and Willow's ready and willing and *waiting* to be one of us in our holy work, to share our trials and responsibilities as well as our joys and triumphs!"

"So I see," Mother Meeker agreed a trifle warily, "but she's young yet, and she doesn't know it all by a long sight, and she's got to mind me for her own good,

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and the good of the Tabernacle and the Home Temple.”

“I know that, Grandmother,” Willow agreed soberly.

“*Of course* she knows that, Mother dear!” the Angel gave a quick tender squeeze to the fingers in her own.

The girl had hardly slept an hour all through the night, and she had eaten no breakfast, and she felt rather light-headed and faint, relaxing as she did with the relief of the satisfactory interview. After all the terrors of the dark hours, the things seemed so sane and sensible in the hearty morning light! It had seemed wiser to let her think herself younger than she really was in order to keep her simple and innocent and obedient; to avoid the danger of worldliness. It had seemed kinder and fairer to leave the dear little baby boys with good, kind Mrs. Bascom whose arms and whose heart and whose life were so empty! She had begged and pleaded for them so pitifully: they had been almost afraid she might do something desperate if they were taken away from her. And Angela had been so fragile then, much frailer, even, than she was now, and the holy work was calling. A good, kind, capable woman like Mrs. Bascom could bring up two sturdy little boys and do everything for them—but *she* could not be about her Master’s business! When the Lord had touched a woman on the shoulder and said—“Follow me!”—she had to follow, even though with bleeding heart, with bleeding feet, relinquishing, through blinding tears, the sweet human ties. And Willow could certainly see that they had been wise in keeping this knowledge from her until she was old enough to understand and appreciate and approve.

As to the matter of that Swedish woman— That was the most difficult thing of all to make perfectly clear

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to her. The first thing and the most important thing was to make the people believe, wasn't it? And the more—well, definite healing impressed them most, didn't it? Therefore, the more of those—well, rather spectacular healings they had, the more people came, the more people believed and were baptized and cleansed of their sins. She saw that, didn't she? Well; sometimes people came up to be cured of intemperance, or asthma, or indigestion or jealousy and hatred; the healing was given, and the poor dear sufferer felt it and knew it, but it wasn't so apparent to the congregation. Sometimes doubters and scoffers, who might have been turned into believers, failed to see anything they thought convincing and carried their hard hearts away, into the world again.

Therefore, the necessary thing and the perfectly right and justifiable thing was to give them something—a *symbol*—to believe. That was all the poor, dear Swedish woman had been; just a symbol; just a—well, like a charade, like a demonstration! She was a believer herself, a good, loyal, faithful, humble soul, and she was glad to do what was asked of her, as her share of the labor in His Vineyard.

And Willow knew that dozens, hundreds, perhaps even thousands *had* been healed just as remarkably, more remarkably,—it was just simply a symbol, that was all, a *symbol*. . . .

The girl's eyes kept closing in spite of her earnest attention and her head was heavy. . . . The room was warm, and she had not eaten nor slept. . . . The relief, the exquisite relief of having things sanely and convincingly explained. . . . She wished Arden Dexter might know, but she could not risk seeing him again, after the

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awfulness of last night. She might write him— The thought of the reporter brought back not only his conduct and Harold's but the hideousness of his charges. Angela and Mother Meeker had not explained them away for the reason that she had not mentioned them: she had decided, in an almost night-long vigil, on her knees, to cleanse them out of her mind and out of her memory forever.

She got up from her low seat and bent over her mother, to lift the slender body to her in a close embrace, gave a dutiful word to her grandmother, and went away to her own room to rest. Miss Eaton was there, and she gave her the queer questioning look she wore so often of late. Willow told her a little of what had taken place; told her with dignity and young pride that she was now fully in her mother's confidence—that she was now a full working partner in Hallelujah Tabernacle and in the Home Temple.

"I'm glad to hear it," the companion said in her toneless voice. "It was time you grew up. I suppose you won't need me very much longer."

"Oh, Miss Eaton! Don't say that! Of course I shall need you. I'm not young, but I'm ignorant of so many things, and I do need your help still. You are—" it was hard to be warm with one so clammily cold, but Willow spurred herself on—"you are really my nearest friend."

"You'll be making other friends, now; quickly," said the woman, unmoved. "I expect your life to broaden out very swiftly, now. Perhaps in a different way from what you expect. Perhaps it won't be happy—all of it; I expect you'll suffer a lot, but it'll be 'grow-

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ing pains.' You mustn't mind." She looked at her closely. "You didn't sleep much, did you?"

"No, but I will take a little rest now—unless you want me to study."

"Rest, first. And when you wake, suppose you read the morning paper. I have a copy, and I'll give it to you."

"But, Miss Eaton—I don't—I never have read newspapers or worldly books!"

"Didn't you tell me, just a couple of days ago, that you wanted to?—That you were sure you could understand people and help them more, if you knew more about them?"

"Yes. I know. But—" she looked puzzled, anxious.

"Well, then! And you tell me you're twenty years old, and that they're not going to treat you like a child any longer. *They* read the papers, don't they?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, then!" said Miss Eaton again. "If you want to prove to me that you're a woman, with a mind of your own, you'll read the *Standard*, news and editorials. You're out of the incubator, at last. All right, then, try your wings!"

She did not look at her once during the conversation, after the questioning glance when she first came in, and her colorless voice took all emphasis out of her words. Even exclamation points lost vehemence in her drab delivery. She went away, then, and closed the door carefully behind her.

Willow took off her tan jersey dress and her oxfords and pulled on a soft robe and tucked herself up on the couch. She tried to stop thinking, because she needed the sleep to refresh her and make her strong

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and ready for her new responsibilities. . . . It was a good world, after all . . . not such a silver, shining one as she had imagined when she was young . . . when she had thought herself young . . . but a fine, sane, *working* world . . . the place for grave, dependable, full-grown women. . . .

She did not stir when Miss Eaton slipped in, presently, with a folded copy of the morning paper in her hand. The companion stood over her for a long moment in silence, just as she did in the mornings when she came to call her, looking down at her with what was—on her singularly expressionless face, almost an expression. She put the *Standard* beside her softly relaxed hand and tiptoed away again.

Willow's reaction, after reading Arden Dexter's explosive story of the fainting woman who was hurried out by the ushers instead of up to the healer, after reading another lurid interview with Mrs. Clyde B. Armitage who was starting divorce proceedings, definitely naming the evangelist as corespondent, after reading the editor's waspish little column with its armor of "alleged" and "who is stated to have said," was a high fury against Arden Dexter and a fierce loyalty to her mother. Her mother had gone with her grandmother to a special meeting of Bible students in the Tabernacle, so she could not fly to her at once with her warm protestations of love and fealty, and she fought down the desire to go at once to Arden Dexter's home, to his office—anywhere—to tell him how utterly despicable was his paper as well as himself.

She ran through the house, the *Standard* crumpled in her hands, longing for some one to whom she might pour out the vials of her wrath.

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At last, for want of a warmer and more sympathetic listener, she sought Miss Eaton. The governess-companion was in her room, sitting in surprising idleness, her hands folded in her lap, watching the door. She gave a violent jump when Willow came in, and a sudden flush rose in her pallid face.

"Well?" she said, very low.

"Miss Eaton," the girl cried, crushing the paper in her hands, "this is the most terrible, the most cruel, wicked slander! My poor mother! It is enough to kill her with grief, to think that the world she gives all her strength, all her life to, is so ungrateful, so disloyal— Oh, I can't bear it! I can't bear it! Beasts! Demons! Devils!" Furiously, her face white, her eyes blazing, she tore the paper again and again, flinging it to the floor and stamping on it.

"Willow! *Willow!*" Miss Eaton rose. "Control yourself."

"I don't want to control myself! I want to fight them, to hurt them as they've hurt her! Oh, Miss Eaton, help me! I'm twenty years old, and I know Bible history and I can teach a Sunday School class, but I'm so dreadfully, stupidly ignorant about the world!" She came close to the companion and took hold of her thin arms and held her with a vise-like grip. "What can we do to punish them?"

Miss Edna Eaton looked at her for the space of a long breath only before she spoke. Her voice was as drab as always.

"Prove that it isn't true."

There was a pause before the girl's lips moved. "What?" she whispered.

"Prove—that it isn't—true."

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"But—but how can I? I mean, I can tell them, and Mother can tell them, and Grandmother, and all of us, and the *Union* will print what we say, but they won't believe it because they don't want to believe it! Their foolish hearts are darkened. Don't you see, Miss Eaton, how terribly hard it will be to *prove* it isn't so?"

The woman dragged her arms out of her pupil's grasp and walked to the closet and took out her hat and cloak. She put them on, settling the hard, hideous little head-piece without a glance in the mirror and shrugging herself into the badly cut, liver-colored garment.

"Yes," she said, going to the door and standing on the threshold. "Yes. I see that. I see that it will be —*impossible*—to prove that it isn't so."

She did not look again at the girl. She bent her head and went out and down the hall and down the stairs, and Willow heard the front door closing quickly.

Her reaction to Miss Eaton's inference, after the moment of stunned horror, was exactly what it had been after reading the *Standard's* attack: a fiercer and more protecting loyalty to her mother. She ran to Angela's room to wait for her, to be ready to throw her arms about her, to sweep her off her feet into a strong embrace, to tell her, with all her young muscle and the best and most fervent words she could muster, that she was there, waiting and ready, passionately pledged to her service and protection, ready to fight the world and the devil and all his emissaries for her.

The lovely, silvery room seemed very empty without the Angel. It was a little disheveled, too. She had heard her mother tell the good Sister in the worker's uniform not to bother; she would put it to rights by and by, herself. She had come in so hastily the night

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before, and she had been weary in the morning, and so eager for a good visit with her mother and her dear little daughter that she had not even unpacked her bag, but it did not matter. She would attend to it when she came home from the Tabernacle, after the Bible class.

Willow flung herself ardently into the work of straightening up the beautiful bedroom. It was a comfort to have something tangible to do for her mother, even such a commonplace little task as making the rich and shining spread smooth, dusting the dressing table and the desk, bringing order to the objects on the mantel, pulling the shades to the right level.

Miss Eaton, too! Miss Eaton doubted her mother. The queer, cold creature who had taught her so faithfully, so uncompromisingly, had lived under the same roof with that silver star, had seen her goodness and her zeal, her unsparing sacrifice of herself, month after month, year after year, and she could doubt her. One more had fallen away. Would there be others? What could she *do*?

She opened the closet door to tuck in the escaping fold of a crisp white Tabernacle uniform, and saw Angela's suit case, thrust well back and almost out of sight. There was another small service to be done! She could unpack her mother's things and put them neatly away,—the little cotton crêpe nightdress and the little gray felt slippers, and the little gray cashmere robe which was just a little shabby.

But, just as she reached in, the gray robe, hanging in the rear of the closet, slipped off its hook and fell across her arm. Her mother had not taken it, then; she had forgotten it. Willow hoped she had not been cold without it, up there in Sister Mercer's house in the

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hills. She hung it up carefully and carried the suit case out into the room and opened it.

She had seen things like that in the shop windows, glimpsing them, at least, as Miss Eaton hurried her past; she had never seen them at close range, never felt their silky softness clinging to her fingers. She thought at first that there must be some mistake; it was some one else's suit case. But there was the modest little monogram—"A. M." on each end, the stickers from three or four cities where Angela had gone to preach. One by one, she picked up the garments—if they were really garments, for they seemed like something in the fairy tales she had never read—holding them up in her fingers, letting the light shine through them, stroking and smoothing them fascinatedly. Most of them were brief and tiny, but there was a negligee, a robe in gleaming silver and orchid, an enchanting phantasy in chiffon and metal threads which was like an etherealized version of the costume Angela wore in Hallelujah Tabernacle.

Willow spread it over a chair and stood away to look at it in worshiping wonder.

Her eyes went from the negligee to the other things, spilling out of the suit case like scraps of a rainbow, clinging sinuously to her hand, and as she stood staring at them their beauty began to take on a sinister quality. They were like lovely, poisonous fruit; like exquisite, gossamer-winged insects whose sting was death.

Her mother came softly into the room, humming a hymn tune, but she stood still at sight of the girl and the contents of the suit case. She started twice to speak, cleared her throat, and said sharply: "Willow, I wish you'd leave my things alone! No one asked you

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to go prying into my closet and dragging out my personal belongings. I wish you would mind your own business!" She went about, picking up the things, twitching them off chairs, stuffing them back into the suit case, and she did not look at her daughter. "I suppose you meant it well enough; you wanted to help me. Well, when I want help I'll ask you!" Her voice was thin and shrill; Willow had never heard it like that before. She snatched up the orchid and silver robe and shook it.

"Where's the cord? There's a cord belonging to this orchid, with silver strands in it." Still the querulous tone, the averted eye.

"I don't know." It was so low that her mother did not catch it.

"What did you say?"

She repeated it faintly. "I don't . . . know. . . ."

"Sister Mercer packed for me. I suppose she forgot it—lost it. Careless!" She folded it clumsily with hands that shook, jammed it into the suit case and shut it, and carried it to the closet, thrusting it in, banging the door.

The room seemed to turn suddenly drab and cold with all the bright, beautiful things shut away out of it.

"Don't stand there staring at me!" Angela shrilled. "Haven't you anything to do?—any lessons to study? Please go away and let me rest. I'm nervous and tired—tired to *death*. I want to be alone."

But the Golden Girl stood still in the middle of the room, opening her golden eyes wider and wider in the fashion which Arden Dexter had held up to scorn. When she spoke it was in a smothered whisper:

"Where is Sister Mercer?"

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"I don't know, I'm sure. At the Tabernacle—in her room on Second Street—up in her cabin, perhaps. That's where I left her." She sat down in a chair, her face turned away. "Will you please leave me *alone*, Willow?"

"Yes," said the girl, levelly, "yes, I'll leave you alone. I'm going to find Sister Mercer."

Chapter XXI

HAROLD drove her up, Miss Eaton sitting beside him in frozen silence, Willow alone in the tonneau.

When they came to the place where the trail met the road she said: "Will you wait for me, please?"—stepped out of the car and walked rapidly away. It was late afternoon, and long level rays of sunlight struck the path, and there was a lark singing somewhere, down below. Wild flowers were out in gorgeous profusion and a butterfly, blundering away from a Fairy Lantern at the sudden disturbance, brushed her cheek: the air was mellow and soft, with a feeling of drowsy warmth in it.

She carefully manipulated the trick gate, leaving it open for her return, hurrying faster after she had passed it.

Sister Mercer would know.

That was the one coherent thought which had taken control of her mind, which had obsessed her consciousness ever since she had walked out of Angela's bedroom.

Sister Mercer would know.

And she would not even need to ask her. She would only have to look at her, to know what she knew.

She had not found her at the Hallelujah Tabernacle, and at the little shabby rooming-house in Second Street they said she had not been back the night be-

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fore, so it was certain that she was in the hidden house in the hills, and in another minute, now, she would see her.

There was the cabin, at last, crouching down behind the screening shrubbery. Willow began to run. She was breathless when she reached the door and rapped.

There was no answer.

She waited, getting her breath, trying determinedly to imbibe something of the peace about her, the placid silence of trees and flowers and hills, the comforting sounds of bees and birds, the cool breeze which lifted the damp hair on her forehead. Then she tried the door, found it unlocked, and went in.

Sister Mercer's hill home was not in prim order as it had been before. It had a lived-in look, and the high-shouldered walnut furniture was pushed about, out of place, which made it look larger and more cumbersome than ever. But the thing which filled the little cabin with dreadfulness and horror was Sister Mercer herself, or the thing which had been Sister Mercer, hanging from a rafter in the low ceiling.

There was an overturned chair near by, and the dangling feet with their unpleasant bunion joints just grazed it. The hands hung stiffly, the remembered hands with their snuff-colored skin and their swollen purple veins and their scrupulously clean, squarely cut, very white nails, the hands which had not disdained any service, however mean or small for Hallelujah Tabernacle and its Angel, as her share of labor in His Vineyard; the hands which had packed the suit case of lovely, rainbow colored, fairy-tale things the night before.

Willow tried not to look at the face. She was re-

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creating it in her mind as it had been on the day of their visit there, when her mother had asked for the loan of the hidden house for a little season of solitude, of prayer and meditation, when she lifted it from Angela's skirts and said the one word—"Hallowed." Covering her eyes, she stepped past and looked at the narrow shelf above the fireplace.

The evangelist's picture was gone.

Then the girl looked up. Sister Mercer had hanged herself with a long silken cord, a delicate orchid, with strong strands of silver woven into it.

Her mother and her grandmother were in Angela's bedroom when she went to find them. She was very quiet about it. So quiet, and so matter-of-fact in her report of the suicide, that her mother, licking her dry lips, said how shocked and grieved she was, and how pitiful it was, but poor Sister Mercer was a strange, pathetic creature, not quite right, mentally, they had always feared, and now, of course, this proved that they were right. It was terribly sad, but they must just try to rejoice that the poor sad soul was at peace at last and—it was a blessed release for her, no doubt—a bitter life—unhappiness—

The words began to come jerkily and without conviction, and the curiously light eyes roved uneasily about the room, but Mrs. Meeker looked fixedly at her granddaughter.

"Yes," said Willow, still speaking very quietly. "I know, Mother. I—*know*."

Angela stopped talking then, and her gaze rested on her daughter's face for a fleeting second, and then ran away again, like quicksilver.

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Mother Meeker got up. 'Well, it's supper time—late," she said quickly. "We waited for you, Willow. Let's go down and—"

"I *know*," the girl repeated.

The grandmother sat down again, suddenly and weakly, as if the strength had gone out of her legs. "Now, Willow, now dearie," she began, "you mustn't think—you mustn't imagine—"

The Golden Girl went on, looking at her mother, speaking oddly, impersonally, to them both. "I was afraid. That was why I went to find Sister Mercer. I knew that she would know, and I knew that I wouldn't have to ask her; that, just as soon as I looked at her, I would know . . . what she knew. Well, I did. Just as soon as I saw her—hanging there—with the cord of your robe, which she forgot to pack. You said she was careless, but she wasn't careless. She didn't lose it or forget it. She kept it because she needed it, to do what she had to do."

Angela's face was crimson. "She was insane," she muttered. "Queer, moody, always. She was a crazy woman, and what crazy people do—"

Willow's cool voice went steadily on. "Your picture was gone from the mantel, and the faded shriveled up lilies of the valley—the ones you forgot once, and gave to her. Do you remember what she did when you told her you wanted to borrow her hidden house for meditation and prayer? She got down on her knees and hid her face in your skirt. Do you remember what she said? It was just one word—'Hallowed.' She meant that her house would be hallowed if you stayed in it to rest and to pray." The young, inexorable voice, as toneless, now, as Miss Eaton's, went

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steadily on. "That was because she didn't believe in anything, in people or in God, until she knew you. You made her believe in God again."

The grandmother tried again. "Now, come, Willow, come on downstairs, dearie and—"

Willow went on. "That was because she thought you were good. But you're not good. You're bad; *bad*. That boy—Arden Dexter—told me, and I read what the paper said, but I didn't believe it. I wouldn't believe it."

"Now, you hush!" said the older woman, harshly. "You've no call to say such things! You mind me, now, Babe! You keep still!"

The girl shook her head. "No, I can't keep still. I have kept still for twenty years because I didn't know. But now I know. I knew when I saw Sister Mercer hanging there, with the cord from your robe."

Angela Meeker's face crimsoned again. "Well, who are you to stand there, staring at me as if I were a leper! Who do you think you are, judging me? *What* do you think you are?" Her voice was thin and shrill as it had been when she found her daughter unpacking the suit case. "What do you think you are, I say!"

"Angie!" Mother Meeker cried out sharply, warningly. "Angie, you hush! You be careful!"

"I won't hush!" The evangelist sprang from her chair and advanced on the girl, her exquisite face livid with fury. "I'm sick and tired of her baby stare! I never wanted her, but I kept her and did everything for her when any other girl would have got rid of her, and now she tags me round, day and night, night and day, holding up a halo, and spying on me—*spying* on

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me—" She was stepping toward her, her strident voice rising higher and higher, and the girl retreated before her, sick horror in her eyes. "You needn't look at me like that! I'll tell you what you are! I'll tell you!"

She told her, brutally and terribly. Willow knew the word. She had met it in reading once, and looked it up in the dictionary, and wrung from Miss Eaton a dry and aseptic definition, and now she—Willow Meeker—the little lamb of God, the one ewe lamb of Hallelujah Tabernacle and the Home Temple—The Golden Girl of the high ecstatic services—was that thing herself.

She was that thing herself, and her mother, that silver star, had made her that thing.

Strangely enough, in this black moment, it was the hard grandmother who defended her against the soft mother. The older woman ran to her, and got between the girl and Angela, making a shocked, clucking sound between her wheezes.

"Shame on you, Angie Meeker! Shame on you! The poor young one! Don't you care, Babe! Grammer'll tell you—Angie Meeker, I should think you'd expect God to up'n strike you dead!" She was redly flushed and perspiring, and her thick, solid body shook with excitement. "After all these years, and the poor feller dead—and you know he'd a' married you, Ed Willow would, if he hadn't a' fell'n broke his neck!" The toilsomely acquired diction was slipping away from her in the stress of feeling, and the old vernacular carried the girl back to her childhood. "He figgered you was his wife in the sight of God, and you was young and innocent—seventeen—a *child*— Don't you feel so

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bad, Babe! Grammer'll explain! Grammer'll tell you—"

The evangelist whirled away from Willow and faced the older woman. "Yes, you're a fine one to talk like that! Sang a different tune then, didn't you? Nearly killed me! And it was your fault—all your fault—"

"Why, you wicked, ungrateful—"

"Ungrateful! Yes, what did you ever do for me?"

"What did I ever do for you? Oh, my God! How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have an ungrateful child!" A flash of the pulpit manner, and then back to the fishwife's rage and venom, "Where'd you be to-day if it wasn't for me, you tell me that! You, with your soft lazy ways and your love affairs and your—"

"Where I'd be? I'd be happy, somewhere, that's what I'd be! You wanted money—money—*money*—"

"Yeah,—and you didn't, of course? Oh, no, you didn't want money! You didn't want a limousine and service and rich food and to lay a'bed mornings! Oh, no! And now, when I've worked and slaved and sweated to put you where you are—everything lovely—everything coming our way—then you lose your head over that poor stick and kick everything over! You fool! You crazy *fool*!" She was wheezing and gasping so that she could hardly speak. "All I've done for you—stood by you in your trouble, raised your young one for you—made a respectable marriage for you—"

"Oh, my God! Respectable marriage! Married me off to an old mummy who could have been my grandfather! A fish-faced old scarecrow with clammy hands and cold tea in his veins! Is it any wonder, when a

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red-blooded man loves me— You've kept me a prisoner—in a cage—"

Again it was Mother Meeker of the Tabernacle. "I was guarding you—thinking of your immortal soul!"

"Yes, my soul! My soul was good business, wasn't it? My soul was the goose that laid the golden eggs!" Again the suffusion of crimson, like a hot and searing fluid, staining her delicate face, her slim throat. "But I've got a body, too, a body, and you never thought of that! Greedy and grasping, that's what you are—no mercy—no mercy—" her voice began to rise in shrill hysteria—"and I'm sick and tired of your bossing me! I'm going away—to California—and found a church of my own, without you!"

"Yeah—and how far'd you get without me? And what chance would you have in California? There's a bigger woman there than you are or ever'd be, Angie Meeker! Don't you be a fool! You listen to me, now! You listen—"

"I won't! I won't!" Hands over her ears. "I'm sick of listening to you—*sick*—"

They never knew when Willow went away, making her quiet exit under cover of their loud revilings.

Arden Dexter followed behind the stage in his own car. He saw the girl alight at the Sunset Hill road and start up alone, on foot. She would not be alone long, he was bitterly sure, ruminating in his young rage and disgust: there would be some one—the sanctified chauffeur, probably, though without doubt there were others—plenty of others— He slipped back into low gear and went up the hilly road, after her.

It was almost dark, and he could see the wavering

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flicker of her flash light, like a fire-fly. There would be another one coming down to meet it, he thought; unless it had been decided that to wait in the cabin would be safer. He knew the way; he had come up with the coroner, and seen the body of Sister Mercer hanging by the orchid and silver cord, the ugly feet toeing in ludicrously, the hands more hideous even than in life, and had dashed down the high lights of his story on the way back to the city.

And now the Golden Girl was keeping a date in this house of horror, out of which the stark suicide had so lately been carried. Gad—what was she made of? He hadn't had any illusions about her, but *this*—

His headlights caught up with her and she stepped off the edge of the road to let him go by, but he stopped his machine.

"Want a lift?" his mocking voice inquired.

"No."

"Oh, I see! Expecting some one?"

"No."

"Oh! My mistake! He's waiting in the cabin? Sister Mercer just moved out in time, didn't she? Made way for a little holy necking? A little pious petting!" Once again, although he had promised himself to regard this girl as objectively as he did the rest of her rotten tribe, he found his rage rising, boiling up, boiling over. He stopped his engine, set his brake, put his car in gear, and jumped out.

Willow was plodding steadily up the road but he overtook her in three strides and caught her in his arms. "Can't I be in on it? He'll never miss one or two, will he?"

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She was flaccid; utterly limp in his arms. He bent his head. "It doesn't matter," she said drearily, "now."

He paused, his mouth an inch from hers. "What?"

"I said . . . it doesn't matter . . . now."

"Why not?" His hold relaxed and he let her step away from him. "How do you mean, it doesn't matter now?"

She seemed to be speaking to herself.

"Our Father which art in Heaven;

My father who is in hell."

He peered at her in the scanty light from her lowered flash. "I don't get you."

But the Golden Girl merely shook her head without speaking again, and walked on up the road, and he let her go without protest, staring after her in the fast thickening darkness.

He stood still until he could no longer see the flickering pin-prick of light. Then he walked back to his car, jumped in, started his engine noisily, roared up the hill to a turning place and raced down, honking his horn, to the main highway and swung into it. There was satisfaction, relief, in speed and noise; his foot pressed down on the accelerator until he was doing a smooth fifty-five miles an hour. He would drive for an hour—two hours—all night—until he was tired enough to stop thinking—picturing—tired enough to sleep—

Passing motorists leaned out to look when he set his brakes with a rasping shriek and made a reckless, rocking turn and went speeding back along the way he had come.

The Reverend James Davidson had dined with Mrs.

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Dexter, and the conversation had come round, inevitably, to Hallelujah Tabernacle and Arden.

"For the first time in his life, Jim," the mother admitted, "I'm worried about him. I've never been a worrier, you'll grant, but I am now. This miserable business has gotten on his nerves alarmingly. He isn't able to get it out of his mind, night or day: he isn't sleeping, and that's unheard of, for Arden. He told me last night he was fed up, sick to death of the whole mess, and asked me to go abroad with him as soon as the exposé is finished."

"Wonderful for you both, Maud," said the clergyman, rather wistfully.

She was silent for a long moment, and then she spoke gravely. "Jim, I'm going to say to you—as I couldn't to any one else in the world—that I'm disappointed in Arden for the first time since he was born."

"You mean—"

"His attitude toward this case. In the beginning, the *Standard's* setting out to unmask a fraud seemed to me entirely fitting and commendable, and I quite approved Arden's part in it. Naturally, I expected him to maintain his usual attitude—objective—detached. Instead of which, he has developed a spirit of persecution, almost of inquisition, which has distressed me beyond measure. Especially toward the girl; he's absolutely savage about her."

Dr. Davidson's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Especially toward the girl?"

She nodded, frowning. "The thing is, it's shown me a side of his character—or developed a side of his character—which rather—appalls me." He did not

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speak, and she said presently, with her usual crispness: "Now, Jim, don't try to tell me it's because I didn't send him to Sunday School."

He shrugged a shoulder and smiled faintly. "Well, Maudie, my dear, where there is no vision, the people perish."

"Nonsense, Reverend Doctor Davidson! I don't perish, do I?"

He met her in kind. "Well, my theory is that there are certain perished areas in you, Maudie. . . . But as to the boy, I do seriously think that you have made his upbringing a bit bleak, with regard to the amenities of life. You have always made such bogies of sentimentality and sanctimoniousness that you've rather overshot the mark in the other direction, I think. A child can really do with a good deal of softening and mellowing and absorb a lot of altruism to excellent advantage: the world will temper it, soon enough. You see, an infant is an utterly unsocial animal." He leaned back, putting the tips of his thin fingers together, contentedly embarked on a favorite stream. "It takes the few first years of his life to undo the impressions of the first few months; to make him see what Tridon calls 'the difference between the I and the not—I'; to make him aware of the existence and the rights of others, and of the necessity for—" He broke off suddenly when he saw her expression and leaned toward her penitently. "Forgive me, Maudie! My theories leave you cold to-night, don't they? You can think of nothing but Arden, and his strange reaction to this situation." Then, when she had bent her head in affirmation. "My dear old friend, is it possible that you do not understand why he is so

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especially bitter toward this young girl? Or do you not want to understand?"

"That is it, Jim," she answered him miserably. "I don't want to understand. What you infer is intolerable to me. My son—bewitched by such a tawdry little charlatan— No!" She sprang to her feet and began to walk rapidly about the room. "I won't admit it for an instant! I won't even harbor the thought!"

"You cannot help harboring it, as a reasoning woman," said her friend gravely. "The lad is completely bowled over by her beauty and wistful appeal." Then, as she made an impatient gesture. "Oh, he's fighting it valiantly! His head is with him, but his heart's against him."

"Good heavens, Jim, you talk like a mawkish love serial in a needlework magazine! Do you mean to tell me that you seriously think Arden—*my son*—is bewitched by this creature?"

"And you, my dear, Maudie," he regarded her quizzically, "are talking like a lady in a mid-Victorian novel—'bewitched'—'this creature!'" He smiled when she dropped into her chair again with a murmured word of apology. "I'm sorry to admit that I do, Maud. And there is one other person who recognizes the possibilities of the situation as I do; Nan."

"My poor Nan!"

"Yes; our poor Nan. Of course, if, in the final exposé, the girl, Willow, is found to be as deep-dyed in hypocrisy as her mother and grandmother, Arden will go abroad with you and get over it, just as he would convalesce from an illness. But, if, on the other hand, she is able to convince him of even a measure of innocence, I warn you that—"

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"Listen!" Mrs. Dexter rose quickly again. "There he is, now! That's his horn. But why is he honking like that?"

"It sounds like a peal of triumph or an S O S," said the clergyman, following her to the hall.

Arden Dexter flung open the front door. "Uncle Jim! Good! Come and help me, will you?"

"Of course, Arden. What can I—"

He was flushed and breathing hard and his eyes were very bright. His mother stepped close to him. "Ardie! What is it?"

"It's Willow, Muz!—She's down in the car—hurt! I'll tell you when we get her in. Come on, Uncle Jim—hurry!"

Maud Glendon Dexter stood still in her handsome front doorway until she saw her son and her friend begin the ascent of the steps, carrying between them the limp figure of Willow Meeker, when she ran back into her sitting-room and pushed the heaped-up pillows off a low couch.

"Here," she indicated quietly when the two men came in with their burden.

The Golden Girl's eyes were closed and her face was alarmingly pale. There was a darkly discolored bruise on her forehead with a small cut in the center of it.

"Shall I telephone for the doctor?" Mrs. Dexter heard her voice asking civilly.

"No,—wait, please, Muz. I'd rather not, unless it's absolutely necessary. She's been this way only a little while. She was able to walk from the cabin to the car, with my help. I think it's partly exhaustion—she hasn't eaten anything for days and she's been

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nearly out of her mind with fright and horror." He knelt by the couch and put his arm over her, his lips close to her ear. "Willow? Willow, dear! It's Arden! Can't you hear me? Willow, you're with me—in my house—"

His mother spoke with difficulty. "It was—an accident?"

He shook his head. "No. She tried to hang herself—in the same spot as the Mercer woman. But she didn't know how to tie the knot, and I guess she fainted and fell. Anyhow, she struck her head on the corner of a table."

Dr. Davidson had brought a glass of water, and Mrs. Dexter was carefully and mechanically dipping her handkerchief and bathing the white face. "Why, Arden?" Her lips formed the question stiffly.

"Why?" He drew away from the couch, keeping one flaccid hand in his own. "Partly because she'd found out the truth about her mother, but chiefly because her mother had turned on her—when she saw the jig was up—and told her she was illegitimate." He looked up at his mother and their old friend and his dark eyes were bright with tears and his hard young mouth quivering. "That's what she was going to do; that's the kind she is, Muz—Uncle Jim! That's the girl I've been persecuting and torturing—hounding to death!" He bent over her again and spoke with boundless tenderness. "Willow? Willow, dear! Can't you hear me? It's Arden!"

Mrs. Dexter's face was almost as colorless as the one on the couch. "I think—the doctor—" she began unsteadily.

"No," said her son again. "Wait! I'll tell you!"

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Get Nan. That's it! Nan'll know just what to do, and we don't want any publicity. Uncle Jim, call Nan, will you?"

Over his head his mother's eyes met the clergyman's and a quick look of horrified protest passed between them.

"I happen to know that we cannot get Nan," Dr. Davidson said firmly. "I couldn't possibly reach her this evening."

"Oh, look—" the boy whispered. "Her eyes are opening!"

Maude Dexter stepped back from the couch with her friend of long years, putting out a groping hand, and he took it and held it in a close clasp.

The Golden Girl, stirring with a faint moan, opened her golden eyes and stared wildly about her for an instant and then, with a small, smothered cry of contentment, went into Arden Dexter's arms.

Chapter XXII

WILLOW MEEKER went back to the Home Temple late on the second day following. It had been made certain by telephone that her mother and grandmother would be there, and Arden Dexter drove her over, rather against the judgment of the discreet, middle-aged nurse whom Dr. Davidson had summoned. The girl had had a nasty fall and bump, and was in a nervous condition: she would be, in her opinion, the better for several days in bed.

Mrs. Dexter agreed with her son, however, that the interview Willow insisted on having with her relatives must be gotten out of the way before anything in the way of actual rest and relaxation was to be achieved. Mrs. Dexter was moving about her pleasant rooms in a daze, brisk enough to the casual observer, answering questions crisply, making kind, practical suggestions, but mentally in a mist which obscured the realities of living. There had been no conversation with Dr. Davidson, no comment upon the astounding situation beyond their instant and spontaneous agreeing that Nan Hollister must not be vivisected, and she longed, wearily and eagerly, for the moment when he would sit down opposite her and listen, with his understanding, tired, homely face alert with sympathy, to her vehement statements as to her feeling in the matter. On the surface, before the servants and the nurse, the thing was treated with quiet matter-of-factness:

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"Miss Meeker will have a tray in her room." "My son wishes to know if he may go up to Miss Meeker, now." "We expect Miss Meeker to be with us for several weeks." She heard her cool voice making explanations, giving orders, but something inside her said: "It isn't true, this absurd thing. It is more of Ardie's nonsense. One of his elaborate, carefully worked out jokes, but I must play up, or he'll be disappointed."

Arden Dexter stopped the machine in front of the Home Temple. He was driving his mother's limousine, and after he had turned off the ignition and slipped out of gear he turned to Willow and kissed her gravely. "Perfectly sure you don't want me to go up with you?"

Willow shook her head. "Very sure. But I will be thankful to know you are here, waiting for me."

"I'll be waiting." He was oddly quieted, the flippant and facetious reporter: all the sprightliness, all the humor, seemed to have been drained out of him. He helped her out very carefully and kept his hand under her arm as they walked up the steps, giving it a swift pressure before he left her at the door.

He heard it open and close behind her but he did not look back, getting into the machine again and settling himself with a book which he did not read.

Willow went up to her own room, where she found Miss Eaton waiting, and asked her to tell Mother Meeker and the evangelist that she was there. Would they please come to her room? She had an instinctive feeling against another scene in the lovely, silvery chamber; too many battles had gone against her there.

The companion subjected her to a long, close scrutiny. It was the early morning look, bent upon her pupil before she called her, but the girl did not know

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that, and it struck her as strange, from Miss Eaton, but there was a quality of warmth in it which was welcome and comforting.

"I want to ask you a straight question," she said, standing in the doorway. "Are you going to marry him?"

"Some day," the Golden Girl said gravely. "He knows that I have work to do, first."

The woman emitted a long, slow sigh of utter satisfaction; it seemed to relax her whole meager body. She leaned against the door casing as if she felt suddenly limp, and winked her eyes hard, swallowing. "I'm—glad," she managed, chokily, "*glad*—" her face worked painfully and she gathered herself and turned and hurried down the hall.

Mother Meeker marched in with a militant tread. "Well, Miss! What do you think of yourself, I'd like to know, scaring us out of seven years' growth, leaving your family frantic and taking up with strangers!" Angela, coming behind her, was silent, and the older woman went on. "Of all the ungrateful—"

"Mrs. Dexter telephoned to you that first night," the girl said, cutting into the stream of invective clearly and quietly. "And they aren't strangers, Grandmother: you see, by and by, I'm going to marry Arden."

That gave them pause. They had been in mortal terror over the thought of the ignorant, simple, defenseless girl in the enemy's camp, in the house of the hostile *Standard*, but now they saw, rejoicing, that the guns would be spiked.

"My little girl!" Angela melted toward her. "Mother is so happy for your happiness! And will

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you—*can* you—forgive Mother for her cruelty to you?” She enfolded her tenderly but tentatively. “It wasn’t Mother, really, you know that, darling. Not Mother herself, but a demon of nerves and weariness and frantic anxiety. *Do* you forgive Mother?” She drew away and regarded her at arm’s length. She looked haggard and worn and there was the glisten of tears in her curiously light eyes.

Willow’s eyes grew softly misty, too, and she met the embrace warmly. “Oh, Mother dearest, of course, *of course* I forgive you!” Her voice broke with her feeling. “It breaks my heart to think of all your unhappiness when you were a girl, younger—much younger—than I!”

“I was a child, darling,—a trusting, innocent child,” Angela sobbed.

“Praise God!” Mother Meeker wheezed devoutly.

“And now all the bitterness is past,” the evangelist said liltingly, “and we’ll wipe our tears away, won’t we, darling, and go on together in our holy work, laboring in His Vineyard, humbled by our sorrowful experiences, chastened by our suffering!”

The girl did not speak for a moment. “Yes, Mother, but of course—we must tell them, mustn’t we?”

“Tell them, darling? Whom?”

“The people; our people in the Tabernacle. You see, they have read the paper: they know about it already, and some of them believe it.” She stopped and waited.

“Oh, but many of them, most of them believe in me, darling! It would be a cruel, wanton thing to tell them!”

“It would be the right thing.”

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The small, sedate sentence stood alone in the pretty golden room: she seemed to have nothing to add to it.

"Now, Willow," began the grandmother briskly, "you've no call to be telling your mother what she must do or should do. After all, you're young and inexperienced, and just now you're all upset, but we can judge better— Your mother lost her temper and talked hard to you and she apologized and that's something not many mothers would do to a child, let me tell you, and you said you forgave her."

"Oh, I do, Grandmother! I do!"

"All right, then—act like it! Don't set yourself up for a judge and a jury! Just remember that she's your mother and I'm your grandmother, and we do know a few things!" Temper was warming her tones.

Willow sighed. "I don't know just what Mrs. Dexter told you when she telephoned. I went up to Sister Mercer's hidden house to kill myself, just as she did, because I had found out about my mother, and because she told me—about myself. I was a coward: I wanted to die. But Arden followed me and found me, and now I want to live. I want to live, and help you, Mother."

The older woman started to say something sharp, but Angela silenced her. "Mother knows you do, precious, but you must let Mother decide the best way for you to help her."

Her daughter shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't, about this, Mother dear. I don't think you see it as clearly as I do. I don't mean that you're not a thousand times cleverer and more wonderful, because you are: but I know God has let me see the right thing to do."

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Fear filled up the bright little room and brimmed it over. They started to speak, and stopped again, began arguments and broke them off suddenly, and in the end sat still and listened to her. The thing was unheard of, impossible, preposterous. She thought, this child of yesterday, this babe of the day before, that she could dictate to them, that she could decide great issues and tell them in her milky young voice just what she and God expected them to do!

It was her pretty little plan that Angela should stand up before her congregation and confess her sin and say that she was sorry, and would they please forgive her and trust her again, and help her to be good? Willow was sure that they would.

"Darling child," Angela gasped, "you're insane!"

Mother Meeker was red and choleric. "I should say she won't, Willow Meeker! I wouldn't let her, even if she was looney enough to want to! Never!" She stamped her short, thick foot and wheezed defiance.

"Then," said Willow, sorrowfully, "I must tell them myself."

"Yes, you will!" her grandmother jeered. "And what'll I be doing in the same meantime? Huh? Answer me that? What do you take me for? Why, I'd as soon let you pour coal oil on the Tabernacle and set it afire! You won't set foot inside the church with any such wicked idea as that in your head! I'll lock you up first,—yes, on bread and water, and if that doesn't bring you to your senses—"

The girl was unshaken. "No, you can't do that, Grandmother. You see, Arden's waiting out in the car, and if I don't come out soon, he will come in to

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find me. If anything happened to me—what would his paper say?”

They ceased to threaten then and began to plead, but she was gently inexorable. She was patient with her grandmother, tender with her mother. It seemed to her indeed that she had never loved Angela as she did at that moment, in that hour. It was not love alone, but clemency, not only tenderness but understanding: not the high ecstasy of childish and girlish worship, not the hot young championship of her mother against her grandmother, not even of her silver saint against a cruel world,—but of her beloved sinner against herself.

She did not preach or exhort; she did not condemn or despise. Her feeling seemed to be that they had made a frightful mistake, taken a wrong turning, lost their way.

“Darling child,” the evangelist begged with stiff lips, “think of the good the Tabernacle has done—is doing—The hungry souls it has fed—the empty lives it has filled?”

“I do think of it, Mother. But the house built on the sand cannot stand. Can it? You know it cannot, Mother dearest.”

Angela was like a futile silver wave, breaking and splashing unavailingly against the stern young rock of righteousness. Rage and terror enveloped her. Edwina Willow, child of her first lover, was like something out of that Song of Songs which had been her undoing, that poem of strange exotic phrases which had nourished Brother Beriah Turner of the damp hands and bewitched the tenor with its heady sweetness . . . she couldn't remember, in her sick bewilderment, just what it was . . . terrible?—*terrible*—

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She looked at Mother Meeker and saw that she was livid with fright and anger, and their eyes met and held in a fellowship of fear and helplessness.

They had sown the wind and they were reaping the whirlwind.

They had said: "We are trying to keep her unspotted from the world!"—and they had succeeded, by a miracle, and the miracle would mean their destruction. They had deceived her and tricked her and lied to her, but her ignorance had turned to an armored innocence, riveted into the very fiber of her being.

The thing they had themselves created rose up, now, to destroy them. Their one ewe lamb had grown into a ravening monster: the little lamb of God had changed, overnight, into the Lion of the Tribe of Judah: out of their falsity, they had made truth, and that truth was marching upon them, irresistible, relentless, *terrible as an army with banners*.

Chapter XXIII

WHEN Willow went out at last she found Arden Dexter coming up the steps to meet her.

"I began to think you'd forgotten me," he reproached her.

"Oh, no, Arden," she assured him eagerly and earnestly, "I didn't forget you! I couldn't forget you, ever." She was as utterly without coquetry as she was without guile: it was going to require an entirely new technique, he reflected. She had not the faintest idea of concealing from him the ardor or the extent of her affection for him, and yet she had her very definite withdrawals, quaint, sedate, wholly without provocativeness. She had asked him, the evening before, sitting beneath the genial painted presence of Hart Dexter in the living room, which Mrs. Dexter had abandoned to them, if he would try to be very patient with her: she knew she was both ignorant and stupid and he would find her lacking in many ways, and it was going to be hard, sometimes, just at first, for her to remember that he had stopped being her enemy and become her friend. At that word a gentle glow had irradiated her. Her friend! She told him how hungrily she had wanted a friend, how earnestly she had longed for some one to *like*: if he didn't mind, she would almost rather like him than love him; she had loved so many people all her life, but there hadn't been anybody to like.

She told him about the children of this world and

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her brief defection in their midst, and of the swift doom which followed—ME—ASLES, bringing forth his mirth and his hot indignation; she told him about her early conceptions of the Lord and Brother Beriah as providers, and together they planned for frequent visits to Mrs. Mollie Bascom and the twin baby boy basketball brothers, as Arden suggested their present-day description.

Sitting serenely in the circle of his arm, she planned happily with him for an unclouded future. But first, she reminded him, she must help her mother. The youth had been telling himself, listening to her and looking at her—her childish treble with its new depths of surprised maturity—her golden loveliness—that here was soft and beautiful clay for the modeling. Never, he was certain, had a man so trustful, so pliant, so biddable a maiden; she was a piece of exquisite sculpture come to life under his hands, his lips; he could make of her what he would.

But first, she must help her mother!

She had made the statement as calmly and casually as she had said that she would go soon to Deerville. He drew away and regarded her in amusement and amaze. She thought she could help that past mistress of guile and guilt. He waited, summoning the patience which she had asked of him, and she had made herself quite clear. Her mother, her still immensely beloved mother, needed her; she must go to her and help her to put things right. Young Dexter had not the faintest idea as to what she meant to do or thought she could do, and words of fierce protest rose to his lips: she was free of that mess, out of that putrifying atmosphere—

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she should never go back into it—he would never allow it!

He was to discover then, the rock-like structure on which her sweetness and gentleness were built; it needed only to feel through them to the firm, unmovable structure beneath. Argument, reproach, appeal, alike left her unshaken; her mother needed her. He gave up, presently, pleasantly brooded over by his father's jocund portrait, realizing in that brief period what it might have taken an older and less imaginative man longer to assimilate: she was his to love and adore, to initiate into the gay and comradely world of realities as he knew it, to shape and mold to his will in the small amenities of life, but his to let alone, hands off, when it came to her own difficult issues.

He had gone over it again, waiting outside the Home Temple for her in his mother's machine. His mother, he reflected warmly, had been a brick about the whole thing, as she would be, of course, his dependable, solid, corking mother. But wasn't it a queer thing, he invested himself with ardent young humility, that a liar and a cheat, a rotter, like Angela Meeker, could produce and develop a glorious creature like his Golden Girl, while Maud Glendon Dexter, with everything that she had behind her and everything—every fine thing that she had and was in herself—had managed only a paltry and passable person such as he!

Riding down protests, faint ones, he carried her off to supper in a small, undiscovered Spanish restaurant. The food was excellent, the little room with its creamy plaster walls and the strings of red peppers dangling from the rafters, rather charming, but to Willow it was a window opened on a new vista of dazzling fasci-

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nations. Gad, he told himself, what a lark to show her everything! It would be like having a girl from Mars.

It had been Willow's intention to stay with her mother at the Home Temple, close beside her by day and by night, until she made her confession to her congregation—not that she doubted her in the least or felt the faintest distrust of her faithful intention to carry out her promise, but merely to stand by her in this difficult hour—but both Angela and Mother Meeker acquiesced cordially in Arden's wish to keep her at his own home.

"You stay there and let your Mummer alone," the grandmother had said. "You've got your own way with her; all right, now you let her alone and don't keep fussing at her!"

And the evangelist, tremulous and misty-eyed, had begged for solitude. She needed silence for reflection and prayer, a little space of quiet loneliness in which to make her peace: her precious child could understand that, surely?

Willow was a little disappointed, but she did understand, with a gentle and tender comprehension: it seemed entirely natural to her that her mother should need only God, but she had been humbly hopeful to stand beside her in her small human capacity of devotion. Not even on the day of the service was she permitted to see Angela. There was an affectionate message from her—she would be thinking of her child and her child would be sending her loving and strengthening thoughts, but there must be no distraction until it was all over.

"Has it occurred to you, Arden," his mother asked,

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with the bright impersonality she had maintained throughout, and which seemed to the boy, in his deep absorption, quite natural and regular, "that Willow must bitterly resent the attitude of the *Standard*, which is our attitude—*yours*—toward her mother? You tell me she is intensely loyal."

He nodded soberly. "I know, Muz. I'm going to talk to her and make her see how I have to stand by my guns just as she stands by hers. I've been putting it off, but I won't, any longer."

He went directly upstairs and found her and went at once to his point.

"Willow, you know, don't you, that I'd rather you cut loose from the Tabernacle and the whole works?"

She paled swiftly. "Yes, Arden, but—"

He stopped her. "Wait. You know that's how I feel, and yet you know that I respect your convictions and I'm willing to let you do what you think is right?"

"Yes, Arden," she said, grateful eyes on his face.

"All right! Well, then, it goes double, you see? I mean, you stand by the Tabernacle and I stand by the *Standard*."

A swift look of fright and grief went over her face but she took it steadily. "You mean, the paper—and you—must keep on—punishing my mother?"

He sat down beside her and took her hands into a tight clasp. "It isn't your mother or your grandmother, as persons, as individuals: it's the institution of Hallelujah Tabernacle which isn't straight, Willow; which isn't on the level. It takes money from poor people, who can't afford it, and it takes money from rich people who ought to put it to a better purpose, like my mother's friend, Mrs. Eastwood—"

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"But, Arden, what could be a better purpose than the Lord's work?" she wanted earnestly to know.

"Well, you see, dear"—he stopped. Here was the thing for which he would need the patience she had begged of him, and beyond that patience a delicacy and tact and understanding: poles apart in birth and breeding, in inheritance. In spite of the revelation of her mother's falsity, she had somehow managed to preserve her illusions about the Tabernacle and the value of its work. "Some time, by and by, we'll talk it all out, Willow. You see, I figure there's a lot of the Lord's work, as you call it, that doesn't go on under church roofs; you'll see it, too, when I show you some of the things you've missed."

She told him with an endearing, a disarming meekness that she knew she had much to learn, that she would be grateful for his teaching.

He caught her suddenly to him and kissed her, and held her, his cheek against her hair. "Nothing matters but us," he said unsteadily. "Only ourselves, belonging to each other, loving each other; understanding when we can and when we can't—just loving a little harder. . . . But I'll promise you this! If they come clean at the Tabernacle to-morrow night, if they put their cards on the table, if they're willing to sweep out and fumigate and start over, I'll see that the paper admits it and gives 'em credit. That's all I can promise, but I do promise that."

"Oh, but that's enough! That's all we need, for they will, Arden, they *will*!" Her golden eyes were bright with thankful tears, and he kissed her again, remorsefully, sorrily sure he was tricking her into this

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peace of mind, for the Angel, he was certain, would keep a white wing over the soiled feathers.

The Three Wise Men, Mrs. Dexter, Nan Hollister, all remained away from the service which was expected to be confessional in form and purpose. Willow Meeker went with Arden, wearing her everyday dress, and they slipped quietly into seats in the middle of the church without a word to any one. They had compromised on that, the girl and her lover; she would come to the service, and he would come with her, but to please him she would not go to the platform unless her mother needed her.

"She won't need you," he had said grimly.

"You think not, Arden? Oh, I hope you're right! I hope she will be given strength!" She glowed with the thought. "Yes, she *will*!"

He had nodded without further comment. It was his private opinion that Angela's strength was as the strength of ten, but not for the Galahad reason. He was prepared, he thought, for what would happen, for some tawdry sensationalism far removed from real contrition, but the actual happenings were beyond his imagination. The orderly, commonplace beginnings of the meeting went forward: Mother Meeker read notices and gave out the hymns; the congregation sang, the choir sang, vigorously led by Miss Hammer, and Miss Hammer herself produced a solo full of energy and conviction, the chords of her neck swelling tautly.

Then the grandmother stepped to the edge of the platform and announced that they would now have an allegory, a true and terrible lesson which would go straight to their hearts. Wheezily, she besought their

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earnest attention, their prayerful consideration, and the blessing of the dear Lord on the lesson.

"It must be—my mother will tell them, now," Willow whispered, slipping chilly fingers into Arden's hand.

"Yes. Sit tight. Steady!" He gave her fingers a heartening grip.

"I ought to be with her! *Please*, Arden? I know I promised but I don't think I can bear it!"

He could feel the trembling of her whole body. "No. Not unless she needs you."

The whole auditorium was plunged in darkness, inky black.

"It's coming!" Mother Meeker's voice announced. "Watch out for it, now!"

There was a rustling and a murmur, and one or two women began to weep hysterically; another announced herself as about to faint.

"Fool stunt!" Arden fumed to himself. "Start a panic, easy as shooting fish."

The organ, that organ to which it had been Mrs. Eastwood's sacred privilege to be the biggest contributor, began to roll out solemn harmonies; he had never heard it so sonorous, so tender, with such sobbing cadences. Entrance music! Leave it to them to set the stage. A fine pair of troopers. How long, he wondered, would it take to completely illumine the girl beside him? Under cover of the dark he slipped an arm about her and drew her close to him. "Don't be frightened," he whispered. "It'll be over soon."

"Oh, but I wish—" she breathed unhappily—"Why didn't she just come out and *tell* them?"

"Well, I suppose she has to do things her own way."

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But he was exulting secretly; she felt it, then, the theatricalism, the cheap staginess; there was in her a fineness, a sense of values. What had Ed Willow been like, he wondered? Where had he come from? Somewhere, sometime, there had been good blood, good stock, behind his Golden Girl—

His thoughts were violently broken in upon. He was seated on the aisle, Willow beyond him, and there was a step beside him, and a body leaning over him to get to the girl.

"I saw you," gasped a man's voice, young and anguished. "I saw you coming in! I've followed you, you and your lover! I know where you've been, living in sin!" It was halted by a gulping sob, ludicrously juvenile. "Like mother, like daughter!"

Willow had stifled a cry, and Arden struggled to his feet, dragging the intruder back, managing, after an instant of dark conflict, to fling him into the aisle where he sprawled on hands and feet. It caused a commotion, people rising, striking matches, turning on pocket flashes: it added enormously to the sense of panicky fear the darkness caused.

"Oh, Harold, *please*—" the girl pleaded in a frantic whisper. "Please be quiet! Please go!"

"Oh, I'll go," he said thickly. "I'll go away from you forever—Jezebel! And I'll be quiet—till it's time to speak!"

Ushers had come stealthily down under cover of the blackness and he submitted docilely to being led to the rear.

"Poor Harold," Willow whispered. "I'm so sorry—and so ashamed—"

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"Hush!" people were saying here and there—"Sh. Hush! Look! She's coming!"

Angela Meeker, in all the years of her ministry, had never looked so appealingly lovely, with such an unearthly, other-worldly fragility and beauty. She came gliding down the long runway from the choir in the most silvery and "glistening" robes she had ever worn, her hands clasped penitentially on her breast, her head bowed meekly, drooping from her white throat like a wilted flower. A silvery spotlight followed her all the way, and little gasps and murmurs ran over the closely packed assemblage. The weepers wept more vociferously.

Angela and the spotlight arrived together at the center of the stage and held it, and from the shadows at the rear of the platform crept a sinister figure in black and scarlet tights with horns and a tail. Somewhere down in the darkened house a child screamed shrilly and Willow shrank against Arden, her hands pressed hard upon her trembling mouth.

Satan's emissary circled round and round his prey in a demoniacal dance—a dance so excellently done that Arden suspected and later confirmed the fact that it was a well-known professional—and finally swooped down upon her and caught her up in his arms. Her small slender body looked as little and helpless as a child in its floating white and silver draperies as she fought in vain to free herself.

There were sobs and groans and high-keyed, hysterical cries, and then—"Look! Oh, look! Praise God!"

Down from the other side came a tall white angel with great wings and a shining armor of dazzling purity, and sought to take the evangelist from the

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demon. Then ensued a battle royal—angel against devil—for the fainting form of Angela between them. Mrs. Eastwood's organ pealed louder and louder still, making the whole Tabernacle throb and thrill with its surging roar; Miss Hammer led the choir in a crescendo of piercing and triumphant sweetness; people rose to their feet and swayed into the aisles; a wild, fanatic fervor filled the building.

The pure white champion wrested the limp lady from the dark hold and felled the demon with a single well aimed blow. The black and scarlet figure fell with a shuddering groan, later to crawl slinking away, back into the shadows from whence he had come, and the shining rescuer set the evangelist tenderly upon her feet where she could lean feebly against the pulpit for support, made a gesture of blessing over her head, and ascended the runway. The spotlight obliged him for a little distance and then sped back to Angela.

Still clinging to her pulpit as to the Rock of Ages, she opened her eyes for the first time—and they were glittering with tears—and held out her free hand, which was trembling like an aspen leaf.

"Oh, my friends, my sisters, my brothers, my children," she said brokenly, "He gave His angels charge over me to keep me in all my ways and they have brought me back to you. . . . Tell me that your hearts are open to me still!"

There was a clamor of shouts and hysterical laughter, loud hallelujahs and soft sobbing, cries of "They are, Angel!"—"Praise God!"—"Whiter than snow!"—"God bless you, Angel!"—but the Golden Girl sat with her head bowed, her hands covering her face.

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From somewhere near the rear of the church came a shout.

"What made Sister Mercer kill herself?"

"It's Harold!" Willow said in a gasping whisper.

"Now, shall we all join in a glad hymn of praise?" the evangelist inquired hastily.

The voice came again, and Harold himself was dimly sensed rather than seen, fighting his way down the aisle, ushers hanging to him like leeches. "Why did Sister Mercer kill herself? Answer that!"

Angela stood erect and her voice was strong and sweet again. "Why, brother," she answered mellowly, "it was because she was sick and despondent, poor soul, poor, dear, faithful Sister Mercer, poor—"

"What did she hang herself with?" the hot voice demanded.

There was a gesture of pain and repugnance. "Brother, I suppose it was a rope. Now, let us sing—"

"No, it wasn't a rope! It was the cord of your dressing gown! The cord of your dressing gown that she found in her cabin where you and your lover went—" Some one got a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. The church was a seething riot of wild excitement, for her, against her, imprecations, blessings, curses, vows of undying fealty.

The lights were turned on. It took away the eerie unreality, but it made more definite, more positive, the fact that the tide of battle was running the wrong way. Arden saw Angela throw an appealing look over her shoulder to her mother, who came to the edge of the stage at her short-geared trot.

A small, slight woman well down in front stood up and pointed an accusing finger. "She took my husband

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away from me. I am Lula Armitage. Clyde Armitage is my husband. She took him away from me and from his innocent children!" She flung out her arms. "Make her give him back to us! Make her give him back!"

Mother Meeker, putting a tender and sustaining hand on her daughter's slim shoulder, took command. "Friends," she wheezed, "we have told the truth but not all the truth, because we wanted to be merciful, to spare those that didn't deserve sparing, but now our lips must be unsealed. That devil you just saw shouldn't have worn that costume but modern gentleman's clothes, because he was meant to portray Mr. Clyde B. Armitage. Because *he* abducted my poor child, your preacher here, your teacher and healer! Crept by stealth into her little room in our Home Temple and drugged her and carried her off, insensible, helpless as a babe! That's the devil that carried her away from us, but praise God and his angels that brought her back to our aching hearts, washed whiter than snow!"

Arden Dexter had known of the presence of cub reporters from the *Standard* in the gallery, and had been fearful, and now came a mocking young voice:

"Yeah—whiter than Pittsburgh!"

A sudden shamed laugh from the body of the church, another; a ripple of laughter which was smothered, rippled again, and spread contagiously.

Angela, leaning gratefully upon her parent, lifted her voice. "Brothers and sisters, *de-urr* friends, Mother Meeker has spoken the truth! I was abducted, against my will, against my feeble strength—" Never had she looked more translucently lovely, more utterly "sheer." The velvet voice grew deeper, carried above

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the confusion. "I forgive him. It is my duty as a professing Christian, and God has given me the spiritual strength. I forgive him, but—"

"Yeah, you forgive him!" the same mocking voice from above. "*I'll* say! Forgave him when he dated you up! Forgave him before he got there with the hook and ladder!"

There was no holding them after that. There was a strong party of the faithful, more of them, indeed, by a large majority, but they could not sufficiently leaven the lump of levity. The riotous, ruinous laughter rippled and ran, spreading like prairie fire and like fire, searing and singeing.

"Oh, Arden, she needs me now!" Willow cried, not asking him, taking his consent for granted, beginning to fight her way toward the stage. The boy followed her closely, fending off the throng.

The ushers tried to force people out of the aisles and back into their seats, and women in the white dresses and gray capes of the Tabernacle Workers plied earnestly to and fro, pleading and exhorting.

"Quiet, dear brethren, dear sistren," wheezed Mother Meeker, and the forceful Miss Hammer ran to her for a consultation.

"Let us sing together," the choir leader began.

"Hallelujah!" called a devout believer. "Amen!"

But the boy above caught it up impishly.

"*Hell*-alujah! Say when!" he jeered, and his cohorts beside him and here and there an unregenerate in the balcony, even in the lower floor, repeated it gleefully.

"*Hell*-alujah! *Hell*-alujah! *Hell*-alujah!"

Willow fought her way, pushed valiantly on by

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Arden across the church, slipped through a little door and ran toward the stairs which led to the pulpit. Angela was just coming down, tripping on her floating draperies, her face as white as paper.

"Oh, Mother dearest!" the girl cried brokenly, running to meet her with arms outstretched, "I'm so sorry, so broken-hearted—"

"Get away!" said the evangelist with furious distinctness. "Get out of my sight! It's all your fault, you meddlesome, goody-goody little fool! If it hadn't been for you— Get out of my sight, I say! I'm sick of it all—I'm sick of you! I never want to see you again as long as I live!"

Chapter XXIV

TWO of the Three Wise Men stayed tactfully away from the Dexter house and their delicacy was deeply appreciated.

Maud Glendon Dexter felt that she could do with the quiet commiseration of her old friend, but the robust humor of the priest and the satiric amusement of the rabbi would be difficult to endure. Later, when she had gotten her bearings and her balance again and made her adjustments—if indeed this preposterous thing had in it the elements of permanence—she would ask them all to dine and carry off the situation with a high hand.

Perhaps, if it were still necessary, she would have Arden and Willow Meeker there, and then she would not have to decide upon and develop what her son called “a line.” But the hope persisted! She could hear herself saying—“Positively, you know, there is something uncanny about the women! They could charm the birds off the bush. Why, even my son—hadn’t you heard of it?—my case-hardened newspaper man—came under the spell. It was a brief infatuation, mercifully, but violent enough while it lasted. Rather—well, pathological, I think. And of course, the girl is an arrestingly beautiful young animal! No mentality beyond that of a rather backward fourteen-year-old, I should say, but very satisfying to look at. Yes, it was quite dreadful for me while it lasted, but

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I am trying to regard it as no more serious than a late case of whooping cough or measles, now that he is quite recovered."

It did not seem, however, as if that speech would ever be called for. James Davidson, wrung with sympathy for his friend, held her sternly to a facing of fact.

"I have never seen a lad more head over heels in love," he said.

"Of course, Jim, I grant you that! He's madly, blindly, besottedly infatuated—now. But—"

"No. It isn't only that. It goes beyond the eye and the flesh with him, Maudie. There's a quality of adoration there, of worship, which is very rare and very precious in these days. I think it will endure."

"Yes, but, Jim—surely, in your heart, or at least in your head, for man-like, you can't help being swayed by her—you know that one of two things is true. Either she is a consummate actress, as dyed in the wool as her mother and the awful old grandmother—or else, if she's as ignorant or has been as ignorant of the true state of affairs as she appears, she's a simple-minded moron! And—heaven help me—I can't say which—for my poor boy or for me—is the lesser evil!"

He disagreed with her warmly. "I believe that Mrs. Meeker and Angela deliberately kept the child in a state of entire ignorance as to their methods, not through any real desire to benefit her, but simply as a protective measure for themselves. What she didn't know, she could not betray. And by some means, the innate fineness and purity of the girl—"

She lifted her hands and let them fall limply in her lap. "You are as hopeless as Arden!"

"—the innate fineness and purity of the girl," he

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repeated stubbornly, "have protected her. The things they taught her, for their own purposes, have become the very fiber of her being. The father may have been a strong character, Maud."

Her lips curled. "A strong *man*, Jim. Have you forgotten that he was the Strong Man in a circus? And that Willow is his illegitimate child?"

"Well, even so, he may have had muscles in his mind, you know! We know that he was a foreigner, who roughly translated his name into Willow. He may have had good blood in his veins; he may—"

"He may have been the reckless wandering second son of a great house!" she laughed him to scorn. "And he may likewise have been and doubtless was a crude, good-looking, elemental sort of animal who ate with his knife."

Her friend smiled indulgently. "That's where the rub comes most, doesn't it, Maudie, you shameless snob? You know, I heard the children—Arden and Nan—talking about your serene snobbery once. They agreed that you had doubtless heard that all men were brothers but had outgrown the belief when you stopped believing in Santa Claus. That you would admit under cross-examination that all men are created free, but that the entire Inquisition, working double shift, could never make you say they were equal. And your real objection to this marriage is not on the score of the girl's illegitimacy: 'Beauty and wit are the love child's portion,' I've heard you quote, but because of her plebeian background."

She granted it freely. "Jim, the commonness of it all—that awful old woman, trotting and wheezing, the cheap tawdriness of Angela Meeker— I don't know

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how I'm to endure it. And yet—Arden expects me not only to endure, but to embrace—to adore!”

“Well, you may come to, you know.”

“Never. And—I didn't tell you about the companion?—that Eaton woman came to see me again—yesterday. Preening herself on having accomplished the whole thing, waiting modestly for my bursting gratitude.”

“But how does she figure that? What did she—”

“Don't you remember? She arranged the private interview for Arden with The Golden Girl. She arranged the trip to Deerville. It was all her doing. She is evidently devoted to the girl in her drab and bloodless fashion, and decided to get her out of that life—and decided on the Dexters as the lambs of the sacrifice! Merciful heaven! Why not any other family in the city—the country—the world! *My son!*”

“You may thank her, one day!”

“Never!” she said again with vigor and bitterness.

“Never!”

The evangelist, after her scene with Willow, flung herself out into the alley, ran to the street, holding up her trailing, tripping robes, hailed a taxi-cab, jumped in, and breathlessly gave the man the address of the Home Temple. Arrived there, she sped upstairs to her own room, sat down at the telephone and sent an eager, breathless message, stripped herself of the silvery whiteness and pulled on a soft little dress of gray with a matching cape and hat, threw a few things into a bag and slipped out of the house.

She walked several blocks at a rapid gait, breathing hard, came presently to Glendon Park and waited by

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the drinking fountain. There were no tears in her furious eyes but her bosom rose and fell tumultuously, and instead of standing still she walked quickly and nervously to and fro in a small area.

Only ten minutes passed before Armitage joined her, but she told him petulantly that she had been waiting a long time.

"My beloved!" the tenor said rapturously, embracing her in the shrouding darkness. "I came on the wings of the wind. My Rose of Sharon! My Lily of the Valley!" He kissed her deeply and held her away from him to gloat over her. "But I don't understand—I don't dare to understand! What does this mean, beloved?"

She was weeping now, whimpering like a child in his arms. "It means that I have come to you, Clyde—come to you—forever. I have given it up for you, all the power and the glory. I am heartsick and weary of ingratitude. I want you. All for love and the world well lost."

"Angel! You mean—you are giving up the Tabernacle?"

"They are vipers, biting the hand that feeds them. Perhaps, some day, when they are well punished, when they have learned their lesson, I may go back to them. Not now! Come, Clyde! You have a car?"

"Yes. I did just as you told me. Where are we going? Not up to—"

She shivered. "No! Never again! Anywhere, Clyde! Anywhere you want to take me, away from peering eyes and jeering tongues. I am yours . . . utterly yours . . . to do with as you will!"

He kissed her again, with quick tears in his eyes and

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a quiver of the chin. "I will bring you to the banqueting house and the banner over us will be love! But—" he hesitated diffidently—"my darling, my hands are empty, though my heart is full. It is you who are the queen; I am the beggar." He hung his handsome head very humbly.

Angela opened her bag and took out a thick roll of bills. "I am yours, and all that I have is yours," she said liquidly. "Take me away, Clyde." She seemed almost swooning in his arms. "Make haste, my beloved . . . to the banqueting house . . . to the mountain of spices. . . ."

Arden Dexter, with a stern young reminder to Willow at which she did not demur, gave the *Standard* a free hand. She remembered their bargain, and she had nothing to say, and the amazing thing, he considered, was that she actually said nothing: a quick intake of the breath, a swift tightening of the lips, a look of pain in the golden eyes; that was all. He had a warm wish, suddenly, that the Strong Man, wherever he was, might know how gamely, gallantly and beautifully his child had come on,—and what safe and happy days stretched before her.

She said nothing further when she heard that her mother had disappeared again, but she went to see her grandmother and came back very grave, and asked him if they might have a long talk. Mrs. Dexter telephoned Nan Hollister and took her with her to a concert, and gave them the house to themselves.

The visiting nurse, her friend considered, had borne herself excellently well in a grotesque situation. She had sent hearty and pleasant words to Arden by his

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mother immediately, followed by a brisk, boyish note, and once, running onto him in the street, had wrung his hand and wished him all the luck in the world. With Mrs. Dexter she was silent, agreeing sensibly, when obliged, with certain comments, but never adding fuel to the flame.

Mrs. Dexter, sparing a thought from her own aghast and bewildered rebellion, had said the perfect thing to her. "Nan, my dear, I shall boil up and over to you about this thing, and you'll let me, won't you? Dr. Davidson is a great comfort, but his colossal goodness gets rather in the way of his perfect understanding, sometimes. And you feel not only for me but with me, I know, because you couldn't have been more keenly interested in Ardie if he'd been your own brother."

"That's perfectly true, Mrs. Dexter," Nan Hollister had answered, adding a little heavily—"All we want, either of us, is his happiness."

"That isn't all I want," the older woman disputed sharply. "I have never wanted his blind, maudlin, besotted bliss; I have wanted him to be happy in his own way—our own way—in his own place, with his head as well as his heart, and his sense of humor functioning. Sense of humor! Nan, I give you my word it's gone! It's been taken out, like his tonsils and his adenoids!"

"But it will come back, when he gets his second wind," the girl comforted her.

"I don't know," Arden's mother shook her head. "All his nonsense, all his fun and sparkle, all his nice young impudence—are gone. My entirely satisfactory young worldling with his cheek and his healthy scorn of

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soft and silly things is gone, and in his place is a changeling, an earnest young man with tender and beautiful manners and a purposeful look in his eye: I expect to hear any day that he's joined the—what is it?—Epworth Endeavor or the Christian League!”

“He will come back! You'll see!” Nan insisted.

And frequently, not meeting each other's eyes, they said—“Of course, you know, it may not last!”

Willow came at once to the point in her grave, sedate little sentences. Her grandmother was crushed and broken. She had never dreamed she could be like that. It was impossible not to be sorry for her, in spite of the wrong things she had done. Her grandmother felt, and many of the Tabernacle Workers felt, that she was called upon to carry on the work.

“I don't think she can swing it,” Arden said.

She opened her eyes. “Oh! Not Grandmother, Arden. It is—” she faltered at the expression of his face and omitted the pronoun, putting a hand on her breast instead.

The youth protested hotly; he raged and stormed. Willow watched him unhappily, but unshaken. It was the thing she must do. She felt inadequate, unsure of herself, humble in her sense of unfitness, but Grandmother thought and Mrs. Eastwood thought and Miss Hammer and dozens of them that at least it was her duty to try to hold the congregation together for its own sake, for the sake of the sin-sick and soul-weary who had found solace beneath its sheltering roof.

Only, Grandmother understood thoroughly: there were to be no costumes, no pantomimes, no dances, no allegories; no faked cures, no stage-managed healings.

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If Hallelujah Tabernacle, shorn of its trappings, could continue to give comfort and strength to the needy, Willow Meeker would stand by.

Emboldened at last by his conquered acquiescence, she said it would be best for her to go back to the Home Temple for the present. At that, the boy's carefully garnered stock of patience ran out entirely, and he began to rage and storm again, but this time it was not about the whole wretched and bizarre situation, but directly at her, his Golden Girl, using words and phrases he would have dreamed impossible a few hours earlier. The thing was intolerable. The *Standard* would say—and he could not prevent its saying—"like mother, like daughter"; that the girl was doing business at the old stand, business as usual; that the same old graft, the same old fakes would go on as before, and that she could not stop them, even if she tried.

"Arden!" said her stricken voice. "*Even* if I tried! You *know* I—"

But he went ruthlessly on. All right, then; let her understand this: he had consented to her standing by her mother, because that was the sporting thing, the decent thing for her to do, and he respected her for it. But if she left the Dexter house for the Home Temple, she needn't come back, ever; she could stay there; that was flat.

"Arden . . ." she said again, in a tone he was to remember.

It was one thing to marry her, he said, against everything that his family, his mother, his background and himself stood for, and to lift her out of the cheap ballyhoo she'd been brought up in; it was quite another thing to take half a loaf, to let her go back to her

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circus, the circus was in her blood, after all, wasn't it—sandwiching her home and her husband in between immersions and healings. Not for Arden Dexter. That was for Harold, the pious petter, the godly necker: let her go back to Harold!

Chapter XXV

THE boy made no explanation to his mother. He merely said that his engagement to Willow Meeker was broken: they had discovered, in good time, fortunately, that it had been a mistake.

"There, Jim,—wasn't I right, all along?" Mrs. Dexter exulted to Dr. Davidson, and The Three Wise Men came to dinner again, and talked expansively of widely divergent topics.

"Didn't I always know it wouldn't last?" the visiting nurse triumphed, high color in her good-looking face and a light in her steady eyes. "We must think of it as a siege of typhoid, Mrs. Dexter. It's a long hard fight, but we'll pull him through! Only, we must be careful; *careful*."

They were careful, all of them, not alluding by look or word to the miserable subject, ordering his favorite food, asking his favorite friends to supper, leaving his favorite books and magazines about, keeping the bright talk in the air, like jugglers, tuning in on one of his favorite stations; letting him alone.

Nan Hollister and his mother hardened their hearts against his pallor and the dark hollows beneath his blood-shot eyes—he seemed never to sleep, now—the sharper line of his jaw, the gaunt misery in his young face: he had been a sick person, he was still sick, he would be better soon, and presently he would be well. That was their attitude.

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Dr. Davidson followed him out into the hall, once, and put a thin hand on his arm. "Sure you're right, Arden?"

"Sure, Uncle Jim, thanks." He was moving away from him.

"But even being right isn't always—profitable—" the clergyman urged, "when the price is too high."

"That's hot stuff from you, Uncle Jim," the boy countered, but there was no impertinence in his wrung young voice.

"You know what I mean, Arden."

But young Dexter had shaken his head and let himself out of the front door.

It was Dr. Davidson alone, of all the group, who went to Willow's first service. There had been no advertising, only the briefest announcement: Willow Meeker would conduct that evening's service at Hallelujah Tabernacle, but the *Standard* had played it up largely and mockingly, nevertheless, and the great building was full.

Arden Dexter had given his paper to understand that he washed his hands of the whole mess; they could go as far as they liked, only remembering, please, his eyes looked over the city editor's head, that the girl was distinctly not a chip of the old block. Willow Meeker, it was his conviction, was on the level. On the morning of that day he drove himself seventy miles out of town, and seven-thirty in the evening found him speeding recklessly back.

Dr. Davidson, who had been confidently watching for him, saw him come into the Tabernacle, and left his own place to take a seat, in casual and matter of fact fashion, beside him. "I believe there's going to

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be a big house," he commented without emphasis, and the youth nodded, dumbly grateful for his presence.

It was poles apart from the other service. After Mother Meeker and Miss Hammer, between them, had opened the meeting and the choir and the congregation had sung, Willow came out to the edge of the platform.

People took her very calmly. There were a few broken cries of "The Golden Girl!" "Our lost Angel's child" from the more hysterical wing, but in the main they were quiet, waiting to see what she could do.

She was wearing one of her day-time dresses, a plain little slip in soft yellow, and her face, Arden thought, was very pale. Her speech, which had been carefully learned, was very young sounding and simple: she was very unhappy, as she knew they were unhappy, at the loss—the temporary loss, she was sure—of her beloved mother and their beloved leader, but if they would be very patient with her she would try, not to take her mother's place, but to do her best for them. They must help her and teach her; they must all help each other.

The congregation, kindly, contemptuous, disappointed, gave little evidence of feeling, one way or the other, and after an instant's hesitation Willow came to a period and stopped, and Mother Meeker took the helm.

They all rejoiced, she knew, that while much was taken, much abided; the Lord gave and the Lord took away again, blessed be the name of the Lord. The Devil had carried off their Angel once more, but he would never touch the Golden Girl, their one ewe lamb,

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the little lamb of God, the tender lamb, the young, tender lamb—

"Gad," said Arden under his breath, "sounds like a butcher—"

But for all her wheezing vehemence, she could not hold them. There were rustlings and wriggings; cranings of heads, impatient sighs; a few even rose and went out. The youth and the clergyman could see Willow's face, strained and anxious, and they saw Mother Meeker step forward again and give a sign.

Hallelujah Mary came pounding down the aisle, beating her tambourine as she came. "Here I am, folks! Come from Hell and way stations, headed straight for Heaven! I *do* know where I'm goin', praise God, and I'm on my way!" She clambered up the steps and took the center of the platform. "Well, folks, this is my birthday! Yes, sir, ladies and gentlemen, I'm just one year old in the Lord to-day! One year ago to-night I was in the hoosegow! I came here in the Black Maria, in the lock-up taxicab. Gee, folks, cryin' out loud, but I was a twenty-minute egg! I was a booze hound and a dope fiend, and a woman of the streets. The gutter was my home and the gutter was my hope!"

The house was gripped, galvanized into instant attention again.

"Uncle Jim," said the boy hoarsely, "look at Willow! She didn't know they were going to pull this stunt—you can tell by her face!"

"I was in the gutter, folks," shrilled Hallelujah Mary, banging her tambourine, "and how I did love sin! I lapped it up! I spread it on my bread and ate it! But was I too low for Hallelujah Tabernacle?"

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I'll say I wasn't! The lower you are, the deeper they dive for you, these glory shooters! Happy birthday, folks! Many happy returns of this blessed day! One year old in the Lord! I'm a baby, but I'm a warm baby, and I know my onions! I got a letter from my boy to-day, a birthday letter, folks, 'cause he knows I'm one year old in the Lord, and he says as soon as he does his stretch—he's in the pen, my boy is—he says, 'Ma,' he says, 'when I've done my jolt, I'm sure headin' for Hallelujah Tabernacle,' he says. 'You watch my dust! If it's kept you off the booze an' out'a the gutter for a year, then, by Gawd, there must be some-thin' in it!'" She banged her tambourine and swung her body, shouting raucously—"Glory Hallelujah! Satan took me for a joy ride, but, Praise Gawd, I walked home! Mary Hallelujah! Hallelujah Mary, that's my name!"

The congregation rocked with delight and approval; this was what they had come for; this was why they went without lunch to put an extra quarter in the plate.

The feature writers from the *Standard* were busily making fish hooks on their pages; the old Tabernacle was back on the job! The Golden Girl was pretty weak tea, after the Angel, but she was doing her best to carry on in the good old way.

Defeat.

Arden Dexter made an inarticulate sound and his friend spoke compassionately. "It's not her fault, Arden. That child wants to give them the sincere milk of the Word, but—"

"But they've been too long on bootleg!"

"I find her a very pitiful figure, Arden."

The boy swallowed hard. "So—so do I, Uncle Jim."

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"She is powerless, for all her good intentions. She is"—his whisper stopped abruptly. "Look!"

Willow Meeker came up behind Hallelujah Mary and took hold of the street walker's arm, tugging at her until she pulled her aside.

"I am very sorry," she said clearly. "I didn't know this was going to happen; I didn't want it to happen; I had said that it must never happen again."

The laughter grew less, died away. Somewhere, high in the gallery, a boy's voice ejaculated in stark surprise:

"Hot ziggotty!"

There were two or three nervous giggles and then they were very quiet, leaning forward, looking at her, listening to her.

"I don't mean that Mary isn't sincere," said the earnest young treble. "Mary means what she says with all her heart, but we are not going to do that sort of thing any more, here in our church. We are going to be quiet; quiet in our words and in our thoughts and in our prayers, so that we can listen, not to our own voices, but to God's."

Arden Dexter stirred in his seat, and the clergyman put a steadying hand on his knee.

"I know that I am young, and ignorant, but I know I am right in this: God can hear us without noise. I have told you that I am not trying, not expecting to fill my mother's place; I could never do that. I will do my best, in my own way, and I believe it is the right way. God will help me. Will you help me, too?"

"Arden—that's big!" James Davidson whispered.

"*Big!*" the youth whispered, his eyes on Willow

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Meeker. He was tense, but the clergyman could feel the trembling of his body.

"And I do faithfully believe, if we are earnest and patient and do our best, God will bring my mother back to us."

"We don't want her!" It was Harold, well down in front, but gamin voices in the gallery caught up the idea.

"We don't want her! Nix on the angel! Give her the gate! Give her the air!"

Laughter again, hard laughter; clucks of shocked protest, here and there a sob. Miss Hammer, vehemently giving out a hymn; the congregation rising, half-heartedly singing, peering up at the platform to watch the angry and sputtering conference between Mother Meeker and Hallelujah Mary, to look at Willow, The Golden Girl, standing alone.

"This may look like defeat to her, Arden," said Dr. Davidson, getting up, "and to you, but I call it victory! That child, standing there, against them all—there's something big about her, something tremendous. That's what's wrecking their Tabernacle. That's what's pulling the tinsel temple down about their ears. Not the greedy old grandmother, not the faking evangelist, but the truth of this child! To me, she's a beautiful and a terrible sight, standing there alone. They can't crush her; they can't put her to flight. They thought they had sealed her up forever in lies and sham and spurious innocence, but she's broken out of her prison to destroy them. Look at her, boy,—something miraculously clean and strong and sweet, growing up out of the mire."

There was a warm mist in the minister's eyes and a

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stain of color in his thin cheeks. "I shall never forget this night and this sight, Arden. I shall be thankful to remember it, when I think myself hard pressed and my courage falters."

The youth was pressing past him, into the aisle. "I'm going to her, Uncle Jim."

"Good boy!" said Dr. Davidson, his voice a little husky. "You go back to her, and this time—you stay!"

He watched him until he was engulfed in the singing throng. People were beginning to leave without waiting for the benediction. He heard them speaking to each other and listened eagerly for their reactions.

"Oh, well, poor little thing! You couldn't expect her to—"

"Say, wasn't that the surprise of your life? Pretty game, the poor kid. Say, I'll betcher Grammer gives her hell and Hallelujah for that!"

"Oh, the blessed, innocent lamb!"

"The cruel scoffers, when she was trying so hard!"

"Well, now, I'll tell you, she hasn't got the eloquence."

"But she can improve, Brother! I heard a feller say the Angel herself was awful bashful at first."

"I don't like her making Hallelujah Mary quit,—a saved soul like her's got a right to testify. Maybe she was jealous—"

"No, no! It's just she's different, and Mother Meeker'll have to let her run things her own way."

"Well, she won't; awful masterful and managing, Mother Meeker is."

"Good-night, Aggie. See you at Praise Service to-morrer?"

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"I dunno; thought mebbe I wouldn't come; it don't seem the same, some way."

"Now, Sister, ain't it the same Tabernacle, and the same Lord?"

"Don't *seem* like it is, without Angel!"

"Hello, Bill! Kind of a wash-out, wasn't it?"

"Still and all, she's sure an eyeful, standing there!"

"Yeah, but she hasn't got it."

"Got what?"

"It."

"What's it?"

"'Dun't esk!' What the Angel has. Nope, she can't cut the mustard!"

Dr. Davidson saw Arden win his way to the cleared space just below the platform, saw him halt there and look up, and although he could not hear because of the ragged singing and the shuffle of moving feet, he knew that he must have spoken to her, because Willow's glance came down from its fixity upon the congregation and rested upon him with amaze and thanksgiving. He saw her motion to the small door which led round to the stage, saw her step toward it herself, saw the boy vanish within it. Then he pressed his own way out and took a street car to the Dexter house, and found his friend with the visiting nurse in the upstairs sitting-room.

"Jim,—you're early!" Mrs. Dexter greeted him. "Is it all over?"

"No, Maudie, it isn't all over. I've come to tell you. It's just beginning."

Nan Hollister slipped out, presently, while he was talking, and they noted her going merely by a look of silent commiseration passing between them.

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When he had stopped talking, his friend managed for him a rather bleak smile. "All right, Jim. The child has courage, I grant you, but I'm not going to pretend even to you, even to myself, that I'm anything but aghast and rebellious over it."

He nodded, getting up to go. "All the same, Maudie, my dear, you will soon be, if you're not already, feeding your fancy on the thought of your golden grandchildren!"

Downstairs, he halted on an impulse and stepped into the living-room. Nan Hollister was there, standing before the fireplace, looking up at the portrait of Hart Dexter.

"Some dark night," she accepted his presence understandingly, "some dark night, I'm coming with a carving knife and slash him to ribbons. *Damn him!*"

He gave a sudden chuckle, but his face was grim. "And when you do, Nan, my child," he said, "I'm very much afraid I shall hold the ladder for you. Would you mind saying that again?"

"Damn him!" she said obligingly.

"Thank you," he returned courteously. "That's what I said twenty-three years ago. . . . That's what I have my—secular moments—of saying still."

Chapter XXVI

ARMITAGE had bought a copy of the *Standard* in the morning, but Angela had managed by means of pretty petulance and wistful imperiousness to prevent him from reading it until afternoon.

She reproached him then for buying the sensational sheet, so inimical to herself and her cause, so filled with venom and calumny, and he had apologized that there was no other paper available and a man did like to keep abreast of the times, even now.

They stopped the car on the outskirts of a prairie town, two or three miles beyond the last straggling houses, a little way off the road in the shade of grouped, friendly trees. The tenor spread the motor robe on the soft leaf mold and they sat with their backs against the tree trunks, their fingers interlaced, a charming pattern of sunlight and delicate shadows traced on their laps.

Angela was softly relaxed, leaning a little toward him in a state of lovely lassitude; the world seemed to be standing still for her. The singer, however, manifested a faint uneasiness. He made, from time to time, anxious remarks as to the immediate future, worried sentences left dangling, unfinished. This was heaven, of course, but—later—afterward—

“Dearest,” the evangelist would answer, “let us take no thought for the morrow. . . . It is the first time in

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my life—in my whole *life*, beloved, that I have ever been free!”

It was utterly Arcadian until Armitage remembered, with a sense of civic slothfulness, that his morning paper was unread at three in the afternoon. Angela had noted, already, certain little fussy habits, little primnesses of domesticity which tenderly amused her, but she found no humor in the present moment. She sat with her light hazel eyes filled with a drowsy day-dream, the Mona Lisa lids lowered, her slim ankles crossed, her frail hands loose in her lap, but a fold of her perfect lip was nipped between her teeth.

It wasn't at all positive, she was telling herself, that the *Standard* had printed everything that happened at the meeting. The young devil who was so mad about Willow might have put a stopper on it. . . . Even in a full reporting, that one thing, that one little word, might not be included, and even if it were, it was her mother who had said it. It was Mother Meeker. She lifted her trailing lids to study him, his handsome head bent over the printed sheets, his handsome hand steadying the pages in the breeze.

“I guess it won't be long, now,” he commented, “till we're all flying across the Atlantic.”

Angela released her lip. There was a tiny red welt on it.

“By Jove, I'd like to have been the lad who did the trick!” he said wistfully, his slightly receding chin thrust manfully forward. “Always thought I'd like to fly.”

“Dearest,” she crooned, “your voice has wings. . . .”

“Heart of my heart,” he murmured in his richest singing tone.

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He read on: he was very firm with France about her debt and full of vigorous public spirit about a projected highway system, wholly without mercy for a convicted murderer, being sobbed over by the softer side of the community. He had an opinion, obvious and ready-to-wear, for every news item; all the solid citizen, this afternoon; Babbit, for the moment, blotting out Paolo. . . .

She curtained her gaze entirely, to let him see she had nothing to dread or to fear. There was the drowsy murmur of wind in the tree tops, the rustle of newspaper in her lover's hands. . . . How silly she had been to worry. . . . He must have finished the main news section and be deep in the sporting page. He adored reading about sports. When other little boys were playing catches he had been practicing his scales, poor darling, but he loved now, with bluff masculinity, to call the professionals by their nicknames, to memorize scores. . . . Silly . . . to worry. . . .

She had actually lost herself in a lull of exquisite relief and the thing came on her, after all her anxious preparation, like a thunderclap.

He was on his feet, his eyes blazing, his face crimson, shaking the pages at her, furious, menacing. "Did you say that about me? Angela! Answer me!" (Not Angel!) "Did you say that?"

"Dearest, what *are* you talking about? Did I say—*what*, darling?" The velvet voice was held down to a plaintive purr.

"That I abducted you—carried you off against your will?"

"No, Clyde! *No*, darling! It was Mother Meeker, in her panic and terror, when they turned on me so

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cruelly. It was dreadful of her, of course, but the poor thing—”

His eyes were racing over the print. “That’s a lie, Angela!” (Not Angel!) “You agreed to it. You repeated it. You said you forgave me. Forgave! Oh, my God! *You—forgave—me?*” He was almost singing it, like something from the Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.

She was beside him, taking the crumpled paper from his grasp, her hands on his shoulders, her lips reaching for his. “Darling—*darling*—listen to me! How can you take the word of that lying sheet against mine?—Don’t look at me like that, Clyde! I can’t *bear* it! Dearest—*listen* to me!”

But he would not listen, and he jerked his head out of range of her kiss. He would not listen to anything but his own lyric ravings, his own operatic rage. She forgave him? *She forgave him?* She, who had lured him from his hearth and home, from poor, adoring, trusting little Lula and his innocent babes, from the little humble home where there was always a light in the window for him, no matter how late, how far he strayed—from the dear little broken toys scattered on the lawn—

Merciful Heaven! She *dared* to forgive him!

Very well. Now he *would* go to South America with the light opera company. They were holding the place open for him. Now he would go, turning his back forever on his folly and his sin.

“Good-by, Angela!” (Not Angel; never, never again.)

“Clyde! *Listen* to me! You can’t do this—you can’t treat me so—*trampling* me— Oh, God! Don’t

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you see you are *killing* me? After all I risked for you—all I sacrificed—*Clyde!* Let me explain—let me tell you— Wait, Clyde—*wait—*”

“*You* forgave *me?*” He fairly yodeled it on the somnolent afternoon air. “*God—forgive—you!* Good-by!”

For a dazed, stunned instant she watched him, standing where she had stood when he wrenched himself free from her clinging arms. Then came full and frightful realization and she gave a shrill cry. Her lover was gone forever, and with him went her car and her money. She was deserted, penniless—the Angel of Hallelujah Tabernacle!

She screamed again, piercingly, and started running after the car, stumbling in the rough road, falling once and picking herself up with a choking sob, running, running, breathless and blinded by tears, until the machine, gathering speed, passed out of her sight, leaving only a little cloud of dust as evidence of its vanished presence, and after a moment or two that, likewise, was gone.

Arden Dexter, hurrying Willow out of the tragic fiasco of her last service, put her into his motor and drove rapidly to Glendon Park, stopping in a small, lonely lane well known to him in the gay young days which seemed ancient history now. Turning off the lights, taking her in his arms, he remembered, ruefully, the girls he had kissed in that sly and sentimental spot, the gay, light loving he had given and taken under the shrouding shadow of that tree. He had come a million miles from that youth, he told himself remorsefully.

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Willow was crying with the desperate abandon of a heartbroken child, and he held her close, groping for a thought with which to solace her, wordless with pity.

"God wouldn't let me serve Him!" she sobbed. "I'm not good enough!"

He disputed it hotly. "You're too good! A million times too good, too fine for that rabble! Morons—cattle—"

"Grandmother said—'Never show your wicked, ungrateful face under this roof again! You have wrecked Hallelujah Tabernacle!'"

"Well, it's a good job if you have! Ought to be scrapped—junk pile of lies and cheats and bunk! Don't you care, Willow! Never you mind, darling—I'll get you a church of your own! I'll buy you one—build one for you!" But against his breast he could feel the negative movement of her head. "No? Don't want a church?"

She did not want another church, she told him, catching her breath childishly, in broken sentences, with sobbing gasps between. She wasn't worthy. She hadn't the power. And even if she had—there would always be the pattern of the Tabernacle before her with all its bitter revelations. She didn't know what to do . . . she didn't know what to think. . . . But she hoped, she believed, God would find some other way for her to serve—

It came to the youth then, her tired trustfulness relaxed in his arms, that he had made good his boast to his mother and the visiting nurse and the Three Wise Men: he had pulled down the cardboard temple and plucked off the Angel's wings and made the Willow weep, and rubbed the gilding off the Golden Girl.

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But beyond that, beyond and above all his threats and prophecies and expectations,—he had found virgin gold beneath the veneer.

He took her home, presently, to his mother's house, and Mrs. Dexter sent the pretty maid to wait on her and make her comfortable for the night, and long after Willow was asleep she went up herself, turning on a shaded light and looking long at her golden loveliness. She remembered Dr. Davidson's cheering jest: it was true. Already the rebellion and chagrin were being pierced through by thoughts of another generation. . . . She was not reconciled; she would never be reconciled, but it was possible that she might be somewhat consoled. After all, beauty was the most satisfying, soul-nourishing thing she knew; and Arden had brains enough for both.

She agreed heartily with her son that the best possible thing would be a speedy marriage (since there was no possibility of Arden's getting over it, why delay, keeping her in a quiver of foolish hope?) and an extended trip abroad.

"You see, Jim," she discussed it with the clergyman next evening, "it will be far easier to assimilate her after she has had six months—and a year would be better—abroad. Then, before I have to present her to my own world, the crudities will have been softened and there will be at least a surface culture, which, with her rather docile and pretty manners, will carry her fairly well. As a matter of fact, if she can be trained to be still and let people look at her—And Arden will do wonders with her, of course."

Her friend agreed. He wished earnestly that the child might have found a warmer and more loving

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welcome, but after all, she had never known love of any sort, and Mrs. Dexter's brisk civility would seem to her humbleness a celestial kindness. And the adoration of her lover and husband would leave little space for other needs.

She came into the room, presently, and walked to him, her hand outheld. "Dr. Davidson, when we come home, will you help me to find work to do? There must be something for me, somewhere. I promise you—" faint color rose in her face—"that I will work in your way."

He took both her hands in a warm and friendly grip. "My dear child, it will be a great happiness—and a great triumph—" he sent a close-clipped smile toward Mrs. Dexter—"to have a member of this household in my church."

The decorative maid came in to say that Miss Edna Eaton was calling, and the older woman rose and beckoned to her old friend. "Come, Jim! I'm sure Willow will want to see her governess alone, and I want to show you the prints I found for the upstairs sitting-room."

The governess-companion passed them in the hall, nodding nervously, hurrying to find her pupil, but when she was face to face with her she had little to say. She sat down and looked at her, wearing an expression which was new and strange to her charge.

"Oh, Miss Eaton," she said happily, "it was so dear of you to come! I was going to see you, to tell you everything that's going to happen to me!"

"I want to hear," said the woman, briefly.

"Arden is going to take me to Spain, first, and to Switzerland, and Italy—oh, everywhere! And I'm to

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study the languages and have people to teach me about the cathedrals and pictures, and to hear wonderful music—" she broke off to ask anxiously— "It sounds so glorious, so happy, I'm frightened, Miss Eaton! Are you sure it's right for me to be so joyful? I'm afraid there'll be no work, no sacrifice, no sorrows—"

"I expect a share of that will be good for you, for a while," said the companion, cautiously. "You are a good child. I think you deserve it."

Willow captured one of her lean, unbeautiful hands and held it between her own. "I wish I could make you know how grateful I am for all you've done for me, Miss Eaton! Arden thinks I have been remarkably well trained, considering that I've never been to school."

"I'm obliged to him for his opinion," said Miss Eaton. "But when you're grateful for what I've done for you, remember this: any one could have taught you English and history and the lives of the evangelists and taken you out to walk and made you brush your hair. The only thing I ever did for you was—*this!*" She rose and stood looking about the mellow and beautiful room.

Willow went to stand beside her. "I don't—understand—" she began.

"Don't you? I didn't suppose you would. Well, it doesn't matter." She was moving toward the door, the blank impassivity descended upon her face again.

"Oh, but—*please*, Miss Eaton! Won't you tell me?" The girl was following her.

"Well, then, do you remember the day we met Arden Dexter in the Park, and he interviewed you alone?"

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"Yes, of course, I do! It was terrible—about my age, and my twin brothers, but—"

"I told him to meet us there. I told him I would let him ask you—and tell you—anything he wanted. And I telephoned him that we were to go to Deer-ville and asked him to follow us. Well," she looked long and contentedly about her again, "I did what I set out to do. I got what I wanted for you."

The girl's face flamed. "Miss *Eaton*! You mean—you managed—you did everything so that Arden—Arden and I—"

"All I had to do," said the woman in her colorless voice, "was to get you together, without those harpies. I knew that. And I was right. Well—" she was stepping out into the hall, buttoning her coat high under her sharp chin—"I should like to see you married, if you don't mind, and then—"

"But *of course* I want you! I couldn't bear not to have you, *dear* Miss *Eaton*! And I hope we'll always be—"

"And I should like to see you drive away with Arden Dexter, with Maud Glendon Dexter waving to you. I should like to see that, and then I never want to see you again."

"Miss *Eaton*!" Willow cried aloud in her shocked amaze.

"No. It will be best for you. Turn your back on the old life and everything and everybody connected with it, and start fresh."

"Oh, but *you*—"

"I'm part of the picture; I'd bring everything back. But I shall hear of you, and follow you, wherever I am." Her voice, colorless as her face, broke oddly on

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the last words and she made a plunge toward the front door, and opened it and vanished through it.

Dr. Davidson, returning to the living-room, found Willow alone. She was pale, and the gold-flecked eyes were deeply circled, but her face looked rain-washed and at peace.

"You have made me very happy to-night," he said, seating himself beside her. "You are going to be a radiantly happy woman, and being so—will make numbers of others happy."

"I am happy," she said, "happy and grateful and thankful. If only—my mother—" Her bright gaze misted over.

Again he took her hands in his lean, strong grip. "Willow," he said gravely, "that is a closed chapter. You must loose her and let her go."

"But she is so frail—so helpless—"

"My child," he answered her sharply and sternly, "no one was ever less so. The scales must drop from your eyes, if you are going to enter your new life intelligently and honestly. You can pity her, of course, and wish her well, but you must cleanse her out of your scheme of things forever."

"But—she's my *mother*!"

He shook his head. "Only in one sense—the mere animal fact of reproduction." He saw her whiten and wince, but he went steadily on. "She didn't want you. You were an awkward circumstance. She tolerated you at first, and then she saw—or rather, your grandmother, more astute, saw, that you could be made an asset—your beauty and simplicity and guilelessness. They sealed you up in ignorance and by a miracle of mercy, it became innocence, and that innocence de-

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stroyed them. Your grandmother is right when she says you wrecked Hallelujah Tabernacle, and you can thank God on your knees that it is true. No; Angela Meeker became your mother in the flesh—a biological accident; that strange and inarticulate woman who has just left this room was a thousand times more your mother in deed and in truth.”

The girl covered her face with her hands and he regarded her with grave pity, but his voice did not falter.

“You must cleanse that tawdry temple and those women out of your mind and your memory. You need not feel any anxiety for them; your grandmother and Miss Hammer, I am told, with aid from Mrs. Eastwood, will seek to keep the Tabernacle running, but before you come back from Europe, I hope and believe, it will have perished. But your mother and your grandmother have ample means; they will not suffer. It is not in them to suffer.”

She was crying quietly and he laid a thin hand on her head. “You are grieving, and it is natural and right that you should grieve, but absence and time—those two kindest healers—will bring peace to you. When you come home to this house—this fine and dignified and honest house, we will help you to find service to do in the name of the One they traduced,—in my church, if you find there what you need, in Nan Holister’s settlements,—perhaps in the fine and unobtrusive social work which my old friend, Maud Dexter, does so deftly. It seems to you now that your house of life has been wrecked, but you will build it again, this time upon the rock—the rock of truth. Truth is the keynote of your being. I recognized that when I

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saw you in the pulpit of Hallelujah Tabernacle, pulling it down about their ears. A line came to me which always fires my imagination. It is from Solomon's Song—'*terrible as an army with banners.*'" He repeated it, as if to himself. "Truth, shining, inexorable, undaunted; *terrible*—as an army with banners."

"Then, you don't think," she began unsteadily, waiting to control her voice, and trying again, "you don't think—God has finished with me?"

He laughed aloud. "My child—my dear child—I think God is just beginning with you!"

Arden Dexter came into the room and the clergyman rose and passed slowly beneath the portrait of the youth's father, genial and jocund as it beamed down upon the young lovers, going happily into each other's arms, serenely oblivious of the vanishing presence of their champion.

Epilogue

The man who had the Hot Dog concession at the Street Fair regarded her sourly. "Nix! I ain't runnin' this joint for my health."

"But I am hungry, brother," the velvet voice, softly husky, pleaded. "I have lost everything—"

"Except your appetite, huh?" He turned his back.

"Aw, have a heart, Gus!" a blear-eyed man expostulated. "Set 'em up for the little lady—my treat!"

The Hot Dog man grunted disapproval, but he opened a bun and laid a sizzling sausage inside, and poured a cup of steaming coffee.

"Heaven will reward you both," said the strange women, reaching ravenously for the food.

"Go hire a hall!"

She shook her head. "No; I would rather preach God's word under the starry sky."

The other customers stared. The light fell strongly upon her and they saw that she was very fair and frail and very beautiful, with silver gilt hair and curiously light hazel eyes, and a strange, translucent quality of skin. She was bare-headed, bare-handed, without a wrap; her dress was dusty and she swayed with weariness.

A sallow woman pressed closer to her. "Say, where'd you come from?"

"I've walked the roads, sister,—I don't know how many miles. My car was stolen from me, my purse,

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my cloak—" She leaned weakly against the counter.

A girl's voice sounded, excited, mysterious. "Say, Gert', you know who I betcher that is? 'Angel'—from Hallelujah Tabernacle!"

"D'you hear that?" a man muttered to his companion.

"Yeah. Say, she's a dead ringer for the Meeker woman!"

An elderly man in clerical black pushed through the fast swelling crowd. "Madam," he said stiffly, "I am the Reverend Albert Watkins. You are in trouble?"

"Yes, brother, God bless you!"

"And you are Angela Meeker of Hallelujah Tabernacle?"

The fair head drooped upon the meek throat. "I was—" she faltered. "My mother, my little daughter, greedy, ambitious,—may God forgive them as I do—plotted my ruin, and the friend I trusted left me alone in the dust of the road, penniless."

"The dirty dogs!" ejaculated her first champion. "I'll knock their blocks off!" He swung vigorously at an invisible enemy, lost his balance and sat down with a crash, beginning to weep bitterly into his hat.

The minister considered her coldly. "I advise you to move on, Madam. Your story is too well known here."

"Say, listen," the Hot Dog man objected, "lay off that stuff, parson! You don't own this town, that I ever heard of!"

"That's right!" said another. "Lady wants to make a spiel, O.K. with me."

"God bless you, brothers," said the roughened velvet tones again. "Shall we sing together?"

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"Hail, hail, the gang's all here!" caroled the man on the sidewalk. "No, no! My mistake! Locked in the stable with the sheep, or Nero, my dog has fleas?"

"Hush up, Henry," said a newcomer, carrying an accordion. "Strike up, lady! I'll foller!"

Thickened by dust and tears, and still meltingly sweet—

"‘Come and dine,’ the Master calleth, ‘come and dine!’

You may feast at Jesus’ table all the time!

He who fed the multitude, turned the water into wine,
To the hungry calleth now—‘Come and dine!’”

The instrument wailed out the chords; voices joined in, timidly, lustily; the volume swelled and swelled. A good-looking man in young middle-age came quietly forward. There was an authentic diamond on the little finger of his large right hand, and he slipped a card between the woman's fingers. "My name's Matt Harmon. Got a nice little hall I'd like to lend you. See me to-morrow!"

A smart car had halted at the curb and the man and woman in it leaned forward with astonished recognition.

"Preach to us, sister!" some one pleaded.

"If God will give me strength," the pale stranger whispered.

"Gad, she's a hot sketch," chuckled the man in the car.

His wife slipped into gear and stepped on the accelerator. "I'm taking no chances with you, young fellow, my lad! She always gets her man!"

"No, but—*wait*, Bets! I've got to get her address.

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Eckheimer's coming through here to-morrow, and what do you bet she won't sign a contract? Came the dawn! Say, for crying out loud, wouldn't she be a riot in pictures?"

"Say a word to them, Angel," the sallow woman urged, and then you're coming home with me!"

"God bless you, sister! Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests—"

"Well, and you've got my spare chamber!"

Some one spread a coat and the slim figure knelt upon it. "Dear Lord, out of a full heart I thank Thee for Thy tender mercies—for these new, kind friends, raised up out of the dust of the road to succor me—"

"Sucker is right!" It was a young voice on the edge of the throng.

The man who had bought her coffee and sandwich was still weeping noisily. "Will somebody—anyway—tell me—for God's sake—when is Mother's Day?"

She clasped her hands penitentially upon her breast and her fair head sank upon them. The glare of light from the Hot Dog stand was merciless, but her loveliness bore its revelations without loss, the pearl and opal skin, the sweetly lowered lids, the saintly austerity of delicate bones defined beneath delicate flesh.

"Lookit, Bertha!" It was a thin girl in a shabby sweater who whispered. "She's kind of like a church window . . . like as if you could see clear through her something shining on the other side!"

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away . . . blessed be the name of the Lord! When my father and my mother forsake me—"

A woman sobbed convulsively.

The evangelist swayed on her knees. The man with

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the diamond moved unobtrusively nearer, so that it was against him, in pale oblivion, that she leaned. Her eyes closed and she seemed to cease breathing: her listeners bent to hear a silken murmur.

“Precious Saviour, my mother, my babe, have turned against me, but You have raised up friends in the Wilderness . . . Who is my mother? . . . Who are my brethren? . . . Help me to find the way to their hearts and bring them to Thee . . . to build a little humble, happy church, dear Jesus, to Thy Glory . . . Jesus, dear . . . Jesus, *de-urr*. . . .”

(1)

THE END

SOME NOVELS OF DISTINCTION

THE RESPECTABLE LADY

By KATHARINE TYNAN. The charm of a quiet English countryside pervades this pleasant novel by a well known writer. "Like the threads of some cunningly woven tapestry, blended into a picture tragic in its theme, but holding many an exquisitely idyllic detail."—*The Boston Transcript*.

THE HOLIDAY

By C. LENANTON. "Lively, witty and thoroughly entertaining. A cheerful love story is a subnote to a riot of delicately indicated fun—and a treasure of delightful dialogue."—*Hartford Courant*.

ECHO

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